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MICE *for* AMUSEMENT

A Novel

by

THE BARONESS VON HUTTEN

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FOR
RICHARD AND KILMENY

CASA DA PORTELLA
CINTRA, Portugal

MICE FOR AMUSEMENT

CHAPTER ONE

ONE blowy March night two years ago, Sir Charles and Lady Grace Beville sat together in their library in St. James's Place, awaiting the birth of their first grand-child.

Violet Quintana, their only child, was in labour upstairs, and Bob Quintana, her young husband, had for the past three hours been moving restlessly from the library to the bedroom, moody, nervous, intolerably jumpy.

"My dear boy," Lady Grace said after a time, dropping her knitting into her lap, and frowning up at the young man with her short-sighted, pale-blue eyes, "*can't* you sit still for one moment?"

"Sorry. I—I know I'm being a nuisance, but it's rather hard, you know. She's so little, and so—so frail——"

Beville, on whose lap lay upside-down a shabby old grey cat, gave a grunt. "Violet's not frail," he said. "Little, yes, but not frail——"

Lady Grace glanced ironically at him for a second before she spoke.

"She's doing very well, Dr. MacPhail says, and—it will all be over in a short time now. *Do* sit down, Bob—you're wearing yourself out."

Quintana sat down between his mother- and his father-in-law, and again silence settled on them.

The library was that most pleasant of rooms, a library that is also a living-room. Its book-lined walls made a background of rich and beautiful colour for the less austere properties of a well-bred woman's drawing-room that is at the same time the chief living-place of her family.

The big, handsome, rather stupid face lighted up at the sound, and he moved eagerly forward, tilting the old cat until she jumped down from his knees. "I wonder," he exclaimed, "who that can be?"

"I'll go up to Violet's room, I think—I don't want to see anybody," returned the younger man, and as the hall door opened, he escaped by one at the far end of the library.

As he did so, Domenico, the old Italian who, during Lord Westerham's Ambassadorship at Rome, in Lady Grace's childhood, had been a footman at the Embassy there, and who had been in her own service ever since her marriage, opened the door and announced: "Miss Waterson, Sir Charles."

Beville rose and went towards the new-comer, a gaunt, plain woman in a shabby example of the British national garment. She herself called it her mack.

"Mr. Magwood is laid up with gout, Sir Charles," Miss Waterson announced nervously, "—I've just come from Hampstead—and he asked me to step in and get the latest news of Miss Vi—Mrs. Quintana, I mean—say——"

She said "gaout" for gout, but her h's were solid, and her voice rather pleasant. Beville was glad to see her. Indeed it would have been hard, that evening, to name anyone to see whom he would not have been glad, for he was sick with terror about his daughter, and superimposed on that terror was a layer of desperate boredom.

He was an unsuspecting creature, and, liking his son-in-law, had no idea that his son-in-law disliked him, but the long evening, passed there between his silent wife and the jumpy young husband, had uncommonly irked him.

"I am," he exclaimed with utter truth, "delighted to see you, Miss Waterson. It's very kind of you to come, this beastly night! Let me take off your coat, and you must have a glass of sherry. You are soaked to the bone!"

Miss Waterson's twitter of protest died away as the old Italian came in answer to the bell, and took the order for her restorative.

"My wife," went on Beville in that delightful voice of his, "will be down in a few minutes. She's upstairs with Violet——"

"I—I hope Mrs. Quintana—I trust she's doing *well*? I mean *tersay*——"

Mabel Waterson was close on fifty, but she was a lower-middle-class virgin, and matters of birth, she felt, were not for her to discuss with a gentleman.

Charles Beville's dark eyes twinkled. In that large, rather empty face one looked for globular blue eyes, but his were of the darkest grey, and oddly set, higher at the nose than at the temples, thus giving him an incongruous air of distinction. He understood Miss Waterson so well! He understood all women so well.

"The Little Stranger," he explained, "is expected very shortly, and the doctor assures us that so far everything is satisfactory."

But at the words "so far"—words that seemed to have left his lips unbidden—his twinkle was gone, and to his eyelids came a sudden and poignant droop. "It—it's damnable," he added in an undertone, half to himself, and Miss Waterson's heart suddenly sagged in her bony body.

She was old Thomas Magwood's confidential secretary, and old Thomas Magwood being Charles Beville's confidential solicitor, she had known Beville for fifteen years, but this was the first time she had been to his house; the first time he and she had had a private talk together; a great event for her.

And that sudden droop of his eyelids nearly did for her—as it had done for so many ladies. It was purely a matter of some subtle answering of muscle to nerve, and to do the man justice, he was unconscious of it, but it was extremely beguiling.

"If," he went on, naïvely repeating one of the oldest

clichés in the world, "there was only something one could *do* for her!"

"Yes, I know, I *know*," Miss Waterson agreed warmly.

And then Domenico brought in a big tray, and set it on a small table, and Beville's thoughts turned to hospitality.

Miss Waterson, on her embarrassed entry, had subsided into his chair, and there she sat, a homely figure in dark blue, her dyed black hair bristling in angular curls from under a lamentable hat, sipping, in the most refined manner, her glass of sherry.

"Whatever," she exclaimed suddenly, curling her little finger afresh, "*whatever* would Dad and Mums say if they could see me drinking sherry?"

Lady Grace, coming in as she spoke, was very kind to Miss Waterson, and her thin, long-nosed face for a moment lost its look of aloofness.

"—very kind indeed of you," Lady Grace repeated. "Yes, everything is going on well, and Dr. MacPhail says——"

Domenico Salieri knew perfectly well that his mistress would not be at all glad to see the second lady he ushered into the library that night, and he even ventured to explain to Mrs. Paull exactly what were the conditions upstairs.

But Quincy Paull brushed his words away with a gesture.

"I know, I know," she declared, in her oddly metallic voice, "but her ladyship will see *me*; where is she, in the library?"

Her slim figure was scantily, but by a master-hand, draped in white-and-gold satin brocade, her olive-green, gleaming hair was packed close to her head, and the only colour in her face was the pillar-box red of her very long mouth. When she smiled her big teeth looked a trifle ferocious; it was a man-eating face.

And she was a-glitter with diamonds and emeralds.

"I've just come from the Duchess of Shropshire's," she

said very loudly, as Lady Grace gave her an expressionless hand, "and I thought I just *must* come and ask for the latest. How are—*they*?"

Very indelicate indeed, Miss Waterson considered this question, considering that as yet the baby and its mother were—well, *really*!

Then Miss Waterson noticed the expression that had come into Sir Charles Beville's face, and she was glad. For it was plain that for all her fine feathers this loud-voiced lady was not welcome to her host; Beville was now cross and sulky; cross and sulky he allowed himself to look.

Mabel Waterson was a woman full of humility, but she was proud at that moment, for Beville had been glad to see *her*, and she knew it.

And when a girl—even a girl of forty-nine—has worshipped a gentleman for years, and even named her Black Forest canary for him—*well*!

Lady Grace had not sat down. She was pouring tea from the tray the old butler had just brought, and she was giving her whole attention to her simple task, her pale eyes not moving from its sphere.

A very plain woman, Miss Waterson reflected, as she had reflected often before; a nose like a sheep—Miss Waterson, of course, meant a nose like a sheep's, but she did not know it—and such a plain kind of skin. Why, dear old Mum's skin had a fresher colour! Lady Grace was beginning to wrinkle a little, too. What a pity Sir Charles hadn't a different kind of wife; someone brilliant, and handsome, and splendid, like himself——

Mrs. Paull had now told Sir Charles all about the Duchess's party, and was trying to make Lady Grace talk to her, but Lady Grace, still standing and slowly drinking her tea, answered only in gentle monosyllables, and presently she added: "It was kind of you to come to inquire, Mrs. Paull, but I'm afraid I can't ask you to stay. We expect the baby to be born at any minute now, and of course you'll understand——"

Under that thickish, sallow skin of Mrs. Paull crept a dark cloud; it was not, Miss Waterson decided, exactly a blush, for blushes are red, or pink, whereas this was really only a kind of colourless darkening.

"I *quite* understand, Lady Grace," the younger woman answered evenly, her voice a trifle more metallic than before; "I only just ran in for a moment! And as a matter of fact, I couldn't stay in any case, as Lord Richard and the Penrose-Penrhyns are at my house now, waiting for supper! They'll be *furious* with me. Well, I'm so glad everything's going well. Give her my love, won't you? *Good-bye*—good-bye, Miss—er——"

"*Waterson*," put in Beville sharply, as she turned to him. What a snub! What a moment for Miss Waterson!

But Quincy Paull was not beaten. At the door she turned: "Oh, I forgot to tell you something, Charles," she cried, suddenly drawling. "Be a lamb and put me into my car, will you?"

Without a word he followed her, and, as the door closed, Miss Waterson forgot her awe of her hostess. "*Well*," she exclaimed, "*I never!*"

Lady Grace sat down, an irrepressibly amused smile softening her face. "*Do* let me give you a cup of tea," she said.

But Miss Waterson knew better than to stay on.

Her "mack" was buttoned, her gloves on, her hand in Lady Grace's, when Beville, still frowning, came back into the room.

"You must," he said at once, "go home in a taxi, Miss Waterson—mustn't she, Gracie? It's pelting with rain—a brute of a night——"

"Yes, of course you must, Miss Waterson, and it's so late," added Lady Grace kindly. "Domenico, telephone for a taxi, please——"

Sir Charles himself put his humble guest into the taxi, shaking hands with her again as he stood bare-headed in the rain, as if she had been a duchess.

. . . It had been a remarkable evening for Mabel Waterson. She felt, as she sped over her bridge, that she had been unjust to Lady Grace. Not appreciated her, she hadn't. Not that Lady Grace was good enough for Sir Charles, of course—who could be that, indeed?—but because Lady Grace was not a bit cold and haughty, as she had thought. “No, she was as friendly as she could be to *me*, though she just froze that queer-looking lady. Dad and Mums will be *thrilled* when I tell them—” And Dad and Mums were.

.

Meantime Charles Beville and his wife again sat by the fire.

“You must try not to be nervous, Charles,” Lady Grace was saying, disregarding, as he had irritably told himself she would disregard, Mrs. Paull’s intrusion, and taking up her knitting. “Everything is going perfectly well, perfectly normally, Dr. MacPhail says——”

“That,” he shot back at her in one of his unexpected flashes of observation, “is why you’ve been crying!”

“I haven’t exactly *cried*, my dear, but it is dreadful to see her suffer, and—she looks so very young, and so—delicate——”

“Delicate,” he growled, taking up Flannel Rag and scratching her ears. “You say that, and Bob calls her frail! Damn silly, I call it! What’s *wrong* with the girl? What’s the *matter with her*?”

He fumed on for a moment or two, watching her long, white jewelled hands as they moved rhythmically in the firelight. He was feeling extremely uncomfortable, and feeling uncomfortable invariably made him angry.

“Look here, Gracie,” he broke out suddenly, “I’m sorry Quincy Paull came here to-night! I know you don’t like her, and it’s confounded impertinence, her coming here, and I *told* her so, too——”

Lady Grace's long, dusty-looking lashes suddenly covered her eyes.

"I agree with you," she answered quietly, "but I couldn't say so."

After a moment she added: "I don't know her well enough to tell her so."

Was there, or was there not, he wondered, an emphasis on the "I" in her remark?

"*Humph!*" he returned, the doubt making him doubly uneasy. No human being ever said "humph", but every human being makes the sound for which the monosyllable is the accepted symbol.

And now, after uttering the sound, Beville went on in a different voice: "I'm going up to take a dekko at her. I won't go *in*, you know—just look through the door——"

"She'll be glad to see you, my dear, and Dr. MacPhail won't mind—I'd go in for a moment——"

He nodded and left her, glad to escape.

In the quiet room, the silence of which was broken only by the sound of the tall clock in a far corner, and the soft tinkles and crashes of the newly-piled-up fire, Grace Beville went on with her knitting. And presently Quintana again came in.

He was a tall, thin young man with the greenish olive skin of his distant Spanish ancestry, and a certain un-English haughtiness in his manner. Lady Grace liked him so far as her daughter was concerned, but in her own relationship to him she was less happy.

Like many silent and short-sighted people, she was peculiarly sensitive to atmosphere, and the young man's unuttered curiosity about her husband and herself, unobserved by Beville, had at once been felt by her.

"That tea," she began, looking up at him, "is still fresh, Bob. Have a cup. You look exhausted."

"No, thanks, I had a cup of Nurse's a few minutes ago.

. . . My God," he went on, a sudden break in his voice, "I wish it was over."

"We all wish that, Bob. Including," she added, gently ironical, "Violet."

He did not answer for a moment, and then he asked a question. "Do you know, Lady Grace," he began slowly, "what it is that has been making Violet unhappy?"

"Unhappy since when?"

"Ever since before I met her. Elise Aylmer told me that up to a few months before then, she—Vi—had been quite different. Gayer, you know. More like other girls."

"But do you want her to change? To be like other girls?"

The young man frowned impatiently. "Of course I don't. You *know* I don't. But—there has always been something on her mind, Lady Grace. Something that hurts her. And I want her to be happy. My God, how I want her to be happy!"

Lady Grace stopped knitting, and, folding her hands, gazed at him gravely.

"Bob," she began, "you are right. Violet *has* something on her mind, some grief. But I don't know what it is. I—I have tried to get her confidence, and I have failed. Tried indirectly, I mean. We don't ask questions in this family, and I can't intrude on her, but I had hoped that she would tell *you*."

"Well, she hasn't. I *have* asked her, and she has only said that it's nothing that can be helped. It worries me horribly."

There was a silence, and then Lady Grace went on: "Charles can't bear me to say it, but she was always delicate. Always. And always very quiet. *Not* shy, you know, but reserved. People do so mix up those two qualities! But it's only about two years and a half now—I remember the time, as it was just before my father died—that she had a fainting-fit, and fell down those four steps from outside the Blue Room door—you know? The

Blue Room was my dear father's room. Well, it was after that that she changed. When I first noticed that she seemed odd, I thought the fall had hurt her head in some way—or her spine; but it wasn't that, and as I've told you, I don't know *what* it is that changed her so. It is very strange, and very—disquieting, but—Dr. MacPhail thinks the baby will make it all right, so cheer up. *Poor* old Bob," she finished affectionately.

"I hope to God," he returned, "the baby does, but"—he flushed—"I had hoped that *I* might have made it all right, and I haven't, Lady Grace—and that's a rather bitter thought——"

"Of course it is, my dear, but you must be patient. She'll be better at Saucers. She *loves* Saucers—as anyone would!—and she loves you, Bob, and she will love her baby—I'm sure it will come all right."

She laid her hand on his, and looked earnestly at him. "You're nervous and overwrought to-night—as we all are—but things will be much better to-morrow. You'll see, Bob——"

The young man was uncomfortably full of Spanish pride, but he had not much vanity, as his next words showed.

"Lady Grace," he asked, "you *do* think she loves me, don't you? Really, I mean. She's like an angel with me, and she *says* she does, but sometimes I wonder. Because she *is* definitely sad. There are times when she seems almost to forget me. And then she's so—so amazingly fond of Sir Charles——"

"I know," she returned, quietly, withdrawing her hand, "that she loves you very deeply. You need not worry about *that*. As to her father—confidence for confidence, my dear—*son*—her love for Charles is such a big factor in her life that you must just accept it. As," she added after a brief pause, "I had to do."

Never had the young man so liked his mother-in-law; never had he felt so near her, but he was perceptive enough

to say no more, and with a quiet "I see," sat quietly watching her as she knitted in the firelight.

"When Sir Charles comes down," he remarked presently, "I'll go up again for a moment. She seems to like to see me from time to time, and Nurse doesn't mind——"

.

Young Mrs. Quintana was in the bed she had slept in as a young girl. The big room was at the top of the house, overlooking the park, and it had changed very little since she was fifteen, when it had been done over for her birthday. The walls were washed a soft rosy cream-colour, the few pictures were in their old places, the small patterned chintz had been renewed but not changed, and her polar bear skin rug still shone like a huge snow-drift on the polished floor.

Pine cones crackled, as she had always loved to hear them crackle, in the hearth, and as she lay in her agony she could see, through the nearest window, the cloud-thronged sky with its constantly quenched, constantly reappearing moon; a moon that looked like a stone seen through curdled water.

By the fire sat Dr. MacPhail, a rotund, square-browed old man, who had brought her herself into the world, twenty-three years before. He was writing letters on a red leather writing-case.

"My daughter," said Violet faintly, "is a troublesome woman, Phail——"

"All women are troublesome, my dear. Always excepting your memmaw. Ah," he added in a different tone, "here's your peppaw come to see you——"

Without tiptoe-ing, Beville entered and crossed the long expanse of floor towards her. He had small feet, and rocked a little as he walked with an extraordinarily light tread.

"Well," he asked abruptly, "how's things?"

"Not so good, Charles," she answered, trying to smile, "how's yourself?"

His face gave a queer twitch as he sat down by the bed and took one of her thin little brown hands.

There in that bed lay the creature he loved best in all the world or out of it, and that creature looked so pitifully small, so inadequate for the terrible task in which it was engaged——

He did not speak, for he couldn't, and her eyes had shut.

In the silence was to be heard only the scratch of the old doctor's pen, the whisper of the fire, and a sudden scatter of rain against the windows.

The face in the shaded light on the pillow was an odd one. It was very small, very sallow, broad at the brow and narrow at the chin; the nose, slightly flat, and the full, pale lips, might have belonged to some Burmese girl, but the eyes, when they suddenly opened, dark with pain, were grey like those watching her.

For a moment those two pairs of black-grey eyes stared full into each other, and then the girl pulled his hand to her lips and kissed it.

"You must go now, darling," she gasped, "I——"

He rose at once and bending, kissed her pale cheek. "Violet," he whispered. "*Violet*——"

Before that first intolerable cry was torn from her, he had gone, and was speeding noiselessly downstairs, tear-blinded.

"Oh, Gracie," he cried, opening the door. "Oh, Gracie, it's—I can't bear it——"

As he blundered towards her, he stopped short, jerked a hand across his eyes, and cleared his throat.

"Oh, hello, Vincent," he said quietly, "I didn't know you were here. Glad to see you——"

The small, high-shouldered man in the chair facing the fire did not rise. "Thanks, Charles," he said in an unusually deep, unhappy-sounding voice. "It's very late,

but I couldn't resist coming in just for a minute. I knew Gracie wouldn't mind——"

"Of course not, Vincent," Lady Grace put in, "I am always glad to see you. Better have a drink, Charles, hadn't you?"

Beville poured himself a lavish whisky-and-soda, and for a while no one spoke. The new-comer, Vincent Lundy, had a wasted, thin face with over-large, over-liquid brown eyes, unmanageably soft black hair, and a scant, untidy beard.

He was a portrait-painter, a fine and conscientious artist, and a very old friend of the Bevilles. In his face was the indescribable, poignant look of a hunchback, but his small back was straight enough. "How is she?" he asked at length, crouching in his chair and clasping his knees with his fine, white hands.

"I—I dunno. I think it's going to happen soon. Perhaps you'd better go up now, Gracie?"

"Yes, Charles, I think I will——"

She rose. "Vincent has had no dinner," she added, "and I let Domenico go to bed, and all the others are in bed, too. Will you get him something to eat?"

"Of course I will. But what's become of John?"

"Thursday is always John's evening out," she explained, patiently, her hand on the door. Then she left the room.

"Why haven't you eaten?" Beville asked, curiously, as the door closed. "Because of Violet?"

The other man nodded. "Yes," he answered shortly. "She's my god-daughter, so I've a right to be anxious, haven't I?"

"Of course you have, you old rascal! Come along, and we'll forage. The kitchen's the nicest room in the house, since Gracie put in all those lovely white electric things——"

The two extremely nervous men made their way quietly downstairs to the kitchen, and Sir Charles switched on the lights.

It was a big, delightful room, with yellow walls on which gleamed a panoply of outmoded, beautiful copper pots and pans.

Two great dressers were gay with china and porcelain, the huge electric range looked like a block of snow, the tables were covered with marble or glass. In the adjoining room stood the electric refrigerator, a new toy in which Charles Beville took a childish delight.

"Here's half a cold *poultarde*," he called out, opening its doors one after the other, "and some *lovely* lettuce. Oh—and will you have Brie cheese, or Cheddar? Hi, Vincent," he added, coming back to the kitchen door, "where the devil have you got to? *Oh!*"

For in his absence Lundy had opened the door, and stood in the rain on the plot of grass, staring up at the top windows of the house.

"Something's happening," Lundy told him. "Come and look——"

The cold *poultarde* forgotten in his hand, Beville joined his friend, both of them backing towards the paling-reinforced hedge that separated the house from the park. "That's MacPhail's shadow," he cried. "And there's Nurse Widgeon— Oh, my God, Vincent, what a mess the Lord made of these things!"

Charles Beville was very fond of Vincent Lundy and, as was his way, took a reciprocal fondness for granted, so he did not observe that as Lundy crossed himself, he drew away from him.

But he did see that Lundy was praying, so he quietly took the *poultarde* back into the kitchen, where he shook the rain-drops from it, changed it on to a dry plate, and prepared his friend's supper-tray.

Lundy was not an Englishman. He was the illegitimate son of a great English statesman and Marie Lundi, a famous French soprano of the eighties, but these things were rarely borne in on the rather stupid Beville, who had long since come to regard his friend as English.

Now, however, as he stood there in the rain, praying, the little man was most obviously a Latin, and Beville felt a stirring of pity for him. "Poor little beggar," he thought, with that unconsciously insulting compassion of very big, strong men for small and physically weak ones. "Poor little devil. I've always *known* he was in love with Violet, and he's forty-six! And now—another man's child—My God!"

As he set the mellow slab of Brie cheese on a plate, Lundy came in, his dark hair windblown and wet, his face subtly less ravaged.

"Oh, thanks, Charles," he said, "that's very kind of you, but I don't think I can eat. Perhaps later——"

Charles Beville stood still, a cheese-stained knife in his hand. "Later," he repeated, slowly. "*Oh!* I think I'll go up now, and just see— Bring the beer, will you? Not room for it on the tray——"

As they reached the foot of the hall stairs, the telephone bell rang, and, Beville's hands being full, Lundy set down his bottle on a Cinquecento Venetian chest, and went to it. "I'll see who it is while you are upstairs, shall I," he asked, and at a nod from his friend he unhooked the receiver, and Beville set down the tray.

"If it's Sir Lindsay," Beville called over his shoulder as he started upstairs, "tell him to come along. MacPhail is splendid, of course, but I'll feel safer with a specialist——"

But when he came down a few minutes later, banished ignominiously by Dr. MacPhail, he learned that it had not been the great *accoucheur* who rang up.

"It's nearly over, thank God," he began, eagerly. "They've given her chloroform——"

Lundy's hollow eyes, over his bread-and-cheese-champing jaws, regarded him with intense dislike.

"It wasn't Sir Lindsay Webb," Lundy said, indistinctly, "it was Miss Drusilla Battle. I think she was drunk."

Charles stared at him with eyes as inimical as his own.

"Most unlikely," he returned in his surliest voice. "You've no right to say such a thing about a lady. What'd she want?"

"That," returned the artist, cutting up cold chicken, "was perfectly plain. She wanted *you*."

"Miss Battle is trying to stop taking cocaine, and I'm very sorry for her, and I'm trying to help her, so don't be a damned fool and imagine things. What did you tell her?"

"The truth. That your daughter was in labour, and that you couldn't come to the telephone."

"Good. I'll ring her up to-morrow. Have a whisky, as you've not touched the beer?"

"I've got one—thanks——"

For a moment they sat in silence, and then two things happened.

The deep-throated old clock struck two, and Grace Beville, very white, came hurriedly into the room.

"It's over, Charles," she said; "your granddaughter has arrived."

The two men stood staring at her. Sir Charles had turned a deep red, and his ears suddenly shone in the firelight as if they had been varnished, while Lundy's hollow face was the colour of an old bone.

"Thank God," Beville shouted, jumping up, his eyes filled with tears.

But Lundy, in his tremendously acute emotion, instantly became a Frenchman, and bending over Lady Grace's cold hand with a murmured: "*Je vous félicite, chère Gracie*," he kissed it.

Half an hour later Nurse Widgeon, a rosy faced North-country woman, brought in the fateful bundle, and Charles Beville, little knowing how fateful her coming was, and was to be, to him, took his granddaughter in his arms.

"I don't remember," his shaking voice said, "that your mother was as uncommonly plain as you are, Miss Quintana. By Jove! What's wrong with her nose, Gracie?"

"Oh, Sir *Charles*," protested the nurse, "however *can* you? It's a beautiful nose!"

Miss Quintana stirred, and opening an eye, closed it with an absurd appearance of having winked at her grandfather, who burst out laughing.

"Here, Gracie, take your granddaughter. She's a shameless creature," he cried, bundling the newborn creature into his wife's arms, and the two women went upstairs together.

"Well, I must be off, Beville," announced Lundy at once. "My congratulations. Give my love to Violet, will you?"

"I will."

"Then good night."

"Good night——"

Never had the two men parted so curtly, and when he was again alone Beville stood for a while looking into the fire, wondering just what it meant. What an old woman Vincent could be, he reflected, vexedly. It was cheek—damned cheek of Drusilla Battle to ring up his house, but what damned business was it of Lundy's? The girl was an actress, and she probably *had* been tight, though he had denied it, and after all it *was* over a week since he'd made a sign of life to her——

With a heave of his heavy shoulders he switched off the lights, and was on the stairs when the telephone again ripped out its clamorous appeal.

"Is that you, Charles?" said a woman's voice, as he raised the receiver, and his face cleared, and he smiled with pleasure.

"Oh, yes, Edith, it's you, is it? Yes, it's all over! Half an hour ago. A girl, just as you said it would be— Well, my dear, I did mean to, but to be quite honest, I forgot! Sorry, Edith— Yes, it has been a bit trying— Oh, she's splendid. Always is, as you say. A wonderful granny she'll make, won't she?— Right you are, my dear. Good night——"

"Edith Manisty rang up, Gracie," he said, a minute later, at his wife's door. "Sent her love to you, and to Violet——"

Lady Grace, who was sitting at the dressing-table, in a dressing-gown, rose and came towards him, her soft hair tumbling over her shoulders.

"Well," she said, quietly. "It's a good thing it's over, isn't it?"

"It is, indeed! I—I wanted to say something about it to you—" he stammered, "to—er—congratulate you, but Vincent put me off, somehow— By Jove, Gracie, how pretty your hair still is!"

He stood in visible indecision, looking at her. "I suppose," he went on, clearing his throat, as she said nothing, "that there isn't anything I could do for you? Tea or something?"

"No thanks, Charles, I'm very tired, and so are you——"

"Right you are then. Good night—*Granny*——"

He laughed rather haltingly, but her long, pale face was grave, and it did not change.

"Good night, Charles," she said, quietly, and he left the room at once, followed by his hideous old dog.

For some time he stood at his open window, gazing out at the angrily stirring trees. The moon had gone again, and again a steady rain pelted down.

A taxi rattled along Piccadilly, a church clock struck one. Half-past two. When Beville turned from the night and began to undress, he looked bewildered and sulky. "Damnation," he said, in an undertone, taking off his coat.

CHAPTER TWO

OLD Mrs. Lockett—the Nanny of Grace Beville's as well as of Violet Quintana's childhood—sat by her fire in her large room in the house in St. James's Place, pouring out tea for her guest.

The old woman, still brisk as to eye and tongue, had with the years grown heavy and unwieldy, and it was her vanity to consider herself like the late Princess Mary of Teck in her ample, dignified age.

None of the household of 74A had ever seen Her Royal Highness in the privacy of her boudoir, pouring unofficial tea for an unofficial guest, but caps had been caps in her day, and Mrs. Lockett's cap, a fine and elaborate affair of black lace, purple velvet rosettes, and violets, set high on a nest of dry, unrooted, yellowish-grey hair, in the good, old-fashioned way, seemed not unworthy of Her Royal Highness. She wore black silk, with two rows of jet *passementerie* on its more obvious edges, a white frill pricked her soft wattles, and on her shelving Victorian bosom lay a large oval gold brooch whose shining coils encircled a coloured likeness of Gracie Wingwood at the age of four.

Mrs. Lockett was over seventy, for forty-five years she had lived under the same roof with her only two nurslings, and her long and honourable life had given to her intelligent old face a repose and content that made it more beautiful than youth had been able to 'do.

Here in her big red-and-white room, crowded with hundreds of gifts and souvenirs of all kinds, crammed with elaborately-framed photographs of The Family, lived this survival of a more leisurely, less standardized age, respected and loved by those she had respected and loved all her life, and looking forward without fear to being laid one day in the grave whose site she herself had already chosen

in the churchyard of the Dorset village whence came all the Bevilles, and where naturally, her Gracie would—years later—come to lie within a stone's throw of her. Meantime, the old woman gave tea-parties, and to-day was to be one of her best ones.

Her guest was Sir Charles Beville.

It was the last day of March, and a fine blowy, shiny afternoon. Beville had just come from the country—from Upton-Marsham, in Dorset, and in a bowl in one of the windows was a great, clumsy, man-picked bunch of primroses and violets from the Marsham Hall park.

"Esther Barton," he was saying, spread out comfortably in his big old chair, and lifting Mrs. Tanq to his knees, "told me to tell you that Luke's twins are magnificent——"

"Luke Barton takes after his father. Like father like son."

"Not always, Nanny!" He laughed. "What about Miss Mary Ann?"

The old woman poured boiling water into the two big Italian faience cups that she had bought thirty years ago in Rome.

"You're as proud as a peacock that that baby looks like you," she laughed, shrewdly, "yet there's many would say Mr. Bob's a handsomer man than you, Sir Charles!"

"Go on, Nanny! You know I'm beautiful. Who called me a lovely young gentleman, one day in the Embassy Garden in Rome?"

Behind her steel-rimmed spectacles her milky blue eyes gave him a sharp glance. "You weigh more now than you did then," she said, "but it's true, the baby *is* like you. Particularly when she's cross."

Beville took his tea-cup, set it down on one of the old woman's cherished nest of shiny tables, and gave the old dog her party *pâtée*. His smile had gone, but it was not her half-malicious jest that had banished it. He was worried.

"Nanny," he began, after a moment, helping himself to a buttery crumpet from the hot-plate by the kettle, "what d'you make of Violet?"

"Of Violet? She's doing well. She looks a picture with that blessed baby, and she was very bright this morning——"

"I know, I know. But—I've been worrying about her for a long time now, and I thought I'd ask your opinion. She's changed."

"She's married, my dear, and that's the greatest change that can come to a girl——"

"I don't mean that——"

Frances Lockett was very intelligent, so she now said not a word to help the man as he floundered amongst his incoherent thoughts. Her parrot, a silent bird, scratched his head violently, her canaries flickered in their big cage, pleased by the pale sunlight that caught its gilded wires, and Charles Beville showily stirred his tea, unconscious of his hostess's shrewd, not wholly friendly gaze.

Presently he spoke. "Seriously, what *do* you think about things, Nanny? About Violet, I mean. You must know as well as I do that she has been a different girl since—well, since just before his Lordship's death——"

"His Lordship died the 11th of September, 1929."

"Yes. Well—you remember her fainting one day, about a month—it must have been about a month, because I know it was just after we got him up to town for the operation—before he died?"

"Of course I remember, Sir Charles. Isabella found her outside the morning-room door, and you were all frightened to death. But it was only a faint——"

"I know. Dr. MacPhail told us that, and luckily he saw her before she came out of it. But—she's never been the same since, Nanny. It was that faint, or something that happened that day, and not marrying Bob Quintana, that—that did something queer to her. *Changed* her."

He spoke decisively now, gazing at her with an authority that rarely touched his careless geniality. "You know that, don't you?" he added.

"I know," was her slow reply, her eyes softening, "that she did change. Me and Domenico and Isabella all know that. We have often wondered—quite respectfully, Sir Charles, for they are good servants, and I am one, too—what had made the change."

He nodded.

"I once," Mrs. Lockett went on after a pause, "asked Gracie what she thought, but she had no more idea than we had——"

"No? No," he commented, absently. "Gracie wouldn't know——"

He finished the tea for which he had no taste, and obediently giving his cup back to be refilled, took a scone and some strawberry jam.

When his cup again stood at his elbow he went on thoughtfully: "You know, Nanny, the way Violet and I have always been together—I once said to her about something, 'If I were you', and she answered like a shot, 'You almost *are*'—you know——"

Over his dark eyes the brows were drawn together in a kind of resentful bewilderment, like that of a puzzled child. "Well—and mind you I've never told a soul this before—I've been trying not to believe it—since that day when she fainted things have been different. *Between her and me*, I mean. Like—like a pane of glass—something I couldn't get *through*. D'you see what I mean?"

"Yes, I see. It's been there between her and I, too, but I didn't think *you'd* have felt it. She was always so devoted to you——"

Beville started as if an unseen fly had stung him. "Always *was*," he shouted, "you don't mean she isn't still? Of course she's devoted to me. Of *course* she is! You women always imagine things——"

His large face was crimson.

"Now, now, Sir," Nanny protested mildly, "you mustn't lose your temper! I never said she wasn't fond of you. Only—if you're perfectly satisfied with her fondness, why did you ask me about her?"

He laughed a little forlornly. "Oh, well—of course I'm not satisfied. But that's because she isn't right, somehow. Something happened to change her, and she's unhappy, and it makes me miserable."

"Have *you* asked Gracie?" said the old woman, after a pause.

"No. No, I haven't. You see, Nanny, this business of Violet and me *is* Violet's and mine. Hard to explain, but—God forbid that Violet should be like me, but the something quite special and *wonderful* between her and me has gone."

"And you want it back."

"Of course I want it back."

The old woman set down her empty cup. "Well," she said, thoughtfully, "as I just said, she's got a husband now, *and* a baby——"

"Damn it, I know that! I'm not clever but I'm not an utter fool, and d'you think I don't know that nobody can really take what has been given to someone else? I mean to say, what she gives Bob and the baby isn't what *I* used to have! Or what I want! That's why jealousy is so idiotic. Except," he went on, heedlessly, "the jealousy between a man and a—*h'm!* Violet's feeling for me was something she couldn't give to Bob and the baby if she wanted to, and it's gone, and I want it back. So there you are!"

After a pause Mrs. Lockett observed quietly: "If feelings can't be given to other people, Sir Charles, it's a sad thing but true that they can *die*. Now—just supposing—what if Violet's old feeling for you has died?"

He shrank back into his chair as if she had touched a raw wound.

"Died? But—a girl's love for her father can't *die*. Not unless he does something to kill it——"

She nodded sagely. "Not her love, of course. But that—extra special—intimacy and trust—I'm not educated enough to say it properly—that sort of holy friendship there was between you and her from the day she could first say 'Dada'——"

She hesitated, and then went on apologetically: "I don't know, Sir, and you must excuse me, but—sometimes a gentleman does kill the feeling a lady has for him, and it happens to common folk, too. Mightn't you have killed it?"

He drew a deep breath, and the faint dimples again played in his cheeks as the smile of an unblemished conscience came to his lips and eyes.

"I've killed nothing, you wicked old woman," he cried, suddenly, on the crest of a wave of happiness. "I'm not much to boast of, Nanny, but God knows I've never done a thing to Violet except adore her! And what's more she *knows* how I adore her. No, you're wrong, but it's done me good to talk it out with you. She must just have hurt her poor little head when she fell that day—and it's left her a little odd at times, but there's no doubt that she loves her wicked old father as much as ever— There can't be any doubt of that, damn it!"

Rising cautiously, so as not to disturb the myriad knick-knacks and photographs that covered the surfaces of the room like a plague of locusts, he shook hands with his hostess, thanked her for his top-hole tea, turned on Master Lough's voice in "The Wings of a Dove", and, glancing at his watch, went downstairs, light-footed, consoled and happy.

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Violet was sitting up in bed when he opened her door, the baby asleep beside her, and on her rose-coloured eiderdown slept her very small, very aristocratic, Siamese cat, Velvet.

"Oh, how *nice*," she cried as he came in. "How is Nanny?"

"Very well, and I have dutifully over-eaten, as usual when I have tea with her! You look very fit, my darling."

"I'm grand, father, and so is your granddaughter, and I do believe she is going to have your absurd dimples!"

Young Mrs. Quintana looked very small and very dark in the tidy whiteness of her bed, and her oblique brown eyes, usually so oddly level with her face, were sunken. Her voice, too, always soft, was now faint, and on the edge of a just escaped breathlessness.

But she was gay, talking more than usual, and in a disjointed way that was foreign to her.

"Miss Mary Ann," she declared, presently, "has gained nearly a pound. By the time she's five she will be beating her wizened old mother. And oh, Charles—isn't it nice? Vincent is going to paint her each year on her birthday! Vincent admires her."

"Has he been here lately? I haven't seen him for days——"

"He was here yesterday—looking frightfully ill, by the way——"

"Poor little chap! I suppose," Beville went on with an odd smile, "that it has never occurred to you *why* he always looks so—crucified?"

The young woman started, and a faint colour bloomed for a moment in her thin cheeks. "Vincent? No—what d'you mean?" she asked with a touch of stammer that in her as in her father meant great nervousness.

"Oh, nothing! I—was only joking. *Ought* my granddaughter to turn blue like that?"

"Your granddaughter is perfectly all right, darling. Tell me what you mean about Vincent."

"Why are you so interested in Vincent? And you with a perfectly good, man-sized husband. Fie!"

"Tell me. You *must* tell me," she persisted gravely, and half-ashamed of himself he gave way.

"I only meant that now you are grown-up you might have noticed that the poor old fellow is in love with you; always has been. That's all."

"Vincent," she repeated slowly, "in love with me? I don't believe it, father. Why, it can't be true. I *know* it's not true!"

"And I know it is. I've known it for years," he went on, proud of his perspicacity, "for *years*. That's why he looks such a wreck lately! But mind you never tell your mother I told you. She'd 'wither' me for giving him away——"

"Do you think mother thinks he is? In love with me, I mean?"

She put the question slowly, and after a thoughtful pause.

"I've not the foggiest idea. If she does she wouldn't tell me—or you either, now would she?"

Violet frowned in concentration. "No. Oh, no, she'd think it ill-bred to tell, of course—as I suppose it is. But—do you know, father," she went on in a different tone, "this idea interests me very much. And—don't drop dead!—I rather hope it's true!"

With what his brilliant old father-in-law had called his felled-ox expression, Beville stared at his daughter.

"You *hope* it's true, you little brute? Why, in Heaven's name?"

"I shan't tell you why. It's just—just an idea of mine—Oh, here comes Nurse with a loathly potion for your poor daughter——"

"Mrs. Quintana," said Nurse Widgeon, taking up the baby, "must rest now, Sir Charles, she's talked quite enough, I'm afraid——"

"So I'm turned out. Well, my darling," he went on, bending down and laying his cheek for a moment to hers, in their private caress, "you make a good shut-eye, and I'll come up after dinner for a moment."

"Dining in?"

"No. Out. With Edith Manisty, as a matter of fact. She's got a new Coromandel screen—old as the hills, of course—that she wants to show me."

"Oh, give her my love, will you? She's a dear——"

"Yes, isn't she? Well, *arrivederci*. Good-bye, Nurse——"

Whistling softly between his teeth he went downstairs and into the library.

Lady Grace had opened one of the big windows, and stood on the balcony, loosening the earth in a box of daffodils with a long stick.

For a minute Beville stood watching her tall, thin figure outlined against the boughs and swelling twigs of the May-tree in the little garden. "Dear Gracie," he thought, "I am very fond of her. I wish she was fonder of me——"

Then he joined her.

"I've just seen Violet," he said, "and Nurse turned me out. What have you been doing?"

"I went to Arthur Rubinstein's concert. Just got back——"

"Was it a good concert?" He spoke with kindly politeness, but the quiet smile that stirred her pale lips was a little bitter.

"I thought it very good. He played Bach. The Italian Concerto and some others things——"

"Help! I'd as soon listen to the multiplication table," he laughed, and she went on digging amongst the daffodil roots.

There was a pause. The spring light, watery and pale, was going, and a thin mist began to rise under the trees in the park, veiling the worn grass where several young couples strolled arm in arm.

A lemon-coloured streak in the sky drew the attention to the West where undramatically, in the English fashion, the sun was going down.

"Gracie," began Beville, suddenly, in his eternal need

for reassurance and consolation, "Nanny and I have been having a talk about Violet."

"I hope you're not worrying about Violet, Charles? She's doing very well indeed——"

In the uncompromising light her face, as she turned to him, looked old and worn, her unassisted skin almost harsh, her long lashes naked.

"She looks years older than Edith," he thought, as he went on speaking, "and Edith's only two years younger than she is——"

"I'm not bothering—*much*—about her health," he said, "though she does look pretty tired and thin. But—she has changed a good deal since His Ex died. You must have noticed it, Gracie?"

"Papa's death," answered Lady Grace, "was a grief to her, but it was a natural grief, Charles—I don't think it can have changed her."

"I don't mean that——"

Suddenly he was confused; he wished he hadn't opened the subject. He'd kept it to himself for so long, and here he was blabbing it to Gracie! He had felt all right as he came downstairs, he told himself angrily, *why* had the sight of Gracie made him uneasy again? "Oh, *damn!*" he thought.

She stood looking at him, waiting patiently, yet there was in her patience a certain quality of impatience that of late had begun to disconcert him. Had Gracie changed too, he wondered, with quick irritation, or did he just imagine it?

"What *do* you mean, Charles?" She watched his face closely, her muddy stick in her hand as she spoke.

Piccadilly was lighted now, and the melancholy of dying day had changed, giving way to the queer relief of the definite coming of night, with its releases and excitements. Beville shrugged his big shoulders, his face clearing.

"Oh, nothing. It just seemed to me that she's changed,

but I probably imagined it." ("I didn't imagine it. Why am I lying to Gracie?").

Lady Grace took up her scissors and watering-pot, and went back into the house.

"Oh, yes," she agreed, quietly. "Violet has changed. You haven't imagined *that*, Charles."

Sitting down in her shell-shaped chair she held her long hands to the fire, waiting for him to go on, and he stood, Mrs. Tanq sprawling at his feet, his fists plunged deep into his jacket-pockets, frowning dejectedly.

This was not what he wanted. He had wanted his wife—not to laugh at him, though that would have been best (it was years since she had laughed at him), but to tell him that he was a fool; that Violet's change had been merely one of health; or even that it was her marriage that had, inevitably, altered her.

"Oh!" he said, his face blank. "So you have noticed it, then?"

"Naturally. I do," Lady Grace added, with a faint smile, "sometimes notice things."

(Now what does *that* mean?)

There was a pause. Then: "Have you asked her, Gracie?"

"No, I don't like asking questions——"

"The diplomat's daughter," he rapped out, irritably.

"Possibly it's that, but—to tell you the truth, Charles, I at first thought that if she had anything to tell, she would tell—*you*. Later, of course, I thought she'd tell Bob, but when it began—her strangeness—I thought she'd confide in *you*. She has always loved you," went on the level, unshaded voice, "more than she loved me."

"Oh, *Gracie*!" He was sincerely shocked. It was wrong, he felt, that she should know this. But Lady Grace smiled as she opened her brocade bag and took out her knitting. "Did you think I didn't know? Poor Charles. But I also always knew," she added, kindly, "that it was in no way your fault."

"Oh, no, I never—I'm quite sure I never tried—I mean to say— But she is *devoted* to you, Gracie," he bungled on, his face red with distress. Then, in the ensuing silence he added: "Well, I suppose it'll be all right. She'll get better at Saucers. It's a lovely place, and Bob will take care of her. When does he come back, by the way?"

"To-morrow. He rang up an hour ago. He says the rooms are finished, and aired, and heated; that they are really *beautiful*."

"Good. We must go down soon and see it all, Gracie."

Lady Grace glanced quickly up at him, and then into the fire.

"She wants me to go down with them on Friday," she said, hurriedly, "and I thought I'd go. There are lots of little things I can do for her——"

"Oh! I see. Go, by all means, it will do you good, my dear."

He was hurt, and showed it as he always showed a hurt. "Well, I'm going for a walk—come along, Tanq, you fat old swine—I'm dining with Edith, you know, and I thought I'd go and take a dekko at your portrait before I dress. He'll be in, I suppose?"

"Vincent? I suppose so."

At the door Beville turned. "The poor little chap looks pretty seedy, don't you think, Gracie?" he asked, concernedly. "He seems to get smaller and smaller of late, and his 'invisible hump' to get bigger and bigger."

He spoke with sincere, if condescending, compassion, but she frowned.

"I hate that old joke about Vincent's invisible hump, Charles," she retorted. "His back is as straight as yours."

"Of course it is! It's only a—a joke about the hump. But it is Violet's joke, you know, not mine, and he *has* got that queer expression of—of—well, a tortured look, in his eyes. It really is a cripple's expression, poor little chap."

To his amazement his wife's pale face was slowly flooded

with a painful flush. "I *hate* you to talk like that of Vincent Lundy," she broke out. "He is a small man, but his head is magnificent, and—there's something *in* it, too. The condescension of big, stupid men for small men, irrespective of their relative intelligences is—*absurd*. Vincent is a great artist, and only a fool would go on patronizing him as 'a poor little chap'!"

"Well," said Beville slowly, "I'll be damned! I've never in my life seen you so angry! And about Lundy. And I, of course, am the fool!"

"In this matter, yes, you most certainly are," she declared, more calmly. "You are a goose, Charles. I'm sorry I lost my temper, but I've been greatly worried lately—about Violet, of course—and I've been sleeping badly, and I couldn't help it."

"Oh, I don't mind, my dear! But calling me a goose doesn't do away with your having called me a fool—and *meaning* it."

To her surprise he suddenly sat down in his big chair and jerked it towards her, his face resolute.

"But I see what made you angry, Gracie," he began, in his so rarely used voice of decision, "you're sorry for Vincent, and I know why. I've known for years—though he hasn't said a word about it to me."

"You've known—for years? Why, Charles," she faltered, "I hadn't the slightest idea——"

"Well, I had. And now, I suppose, he has confided in you! Oh, yes, my dear girl, I may be a fool, and as I say he hasn't confided in *me*, but after all, I'm not blind—or deaf—and I've known for years. That surprises you, does it? In a silly ass like me?"

"I suppose it does. But go on. Tell me just what you mean, Charles."

She had laid down her knitting, and sat watching him, her hands clasped, a queer, expectant look on her worn face.

"I mean this. When a man becomes thinner and more

—melancholy every day for years, and when he sits for hours—more or less—without saying a word, and when gradually he gives up going anywhere but to one house—well, then even a flannelled fool like me may possibly guess what's wrong with him! My dear girl," he went on, his anger gradually swamped by his enjoyment of his own perspicacity, "I've known for years that old Vincent was in love. And in love in the—the ruinous, eternal way of these foreigners. Why, the poor brute's practically *dying* of it! And you thought I didn't know!"

The clock struck six, and John, the footman, came quietly in and drew the curtains, Beville and his wife, both relieved by the break, maintaining silence until the door had again closed.

"You—you surprise me," Grace Beville murmured, knitting rapidly, and her husband nodded, well pleased, and lifted the unwieldy Mrs. Tanq to his inadequate lap, while the disreputable-looking Flannel clawed jealously at his legs.

"My dear," he declared, "God knows I'm no highbrow, and your Ibsen and Dosto-thingunmbob with his abnormal people, and your Epstein and Bach, bore me to howling-point, but I *can* see through a mill-stone when the hole in it is big enough. Understand?"

"Yes, Charles, I understand."

"How long," he went on, curiously, and full of triumph, "have *you* known?"

"Oh—I can't remember—a long time—I have always been dreadfully sorry for him, of course——"

"Well, and now he *has* confided in you?"

"Vincent," she answered slowly, "is a man who can keep his own counsel and—who would detest—pity. He never said a word to me——"

"You've been seeing him nearly every day for years," he broke in, "and he's never told you! By Jove, he's a queer fish."

"I was going to add, when you interrupted me," she

qualified quietly, "that though I knew, he never *said* one word to me until the other day. The day after the baby was born, it was. Then—he told me."

"I see! He waited for that! And what did he say? You see, Gracie, whether you like it or not, *I'm* sorry for him, too. What did he say?"

"My dear Charles, you surely don't think I'm going to tell you?"

She had risen, and was hanging her work-bag on the knob of the little table in the corner by her chair.

"I must go up to see Nanny now," she added, "I promised her. We—you and I—will have a long talk before I go to Saucers."

"Right you are. But tell me one thing," he begged. "Have you mentioned it to Violet?"

Her clear light eyes met his gravely.

"No," she answered, "I haven't. I have been waiting till she is really strong."

"If I were you I shouldn't make much of it," he went on. "For as a matter of fact, she already knows. *I've* told her."

"You've told her?" Grace Beville's face had grown ash-white. "But *why*? Surely it was *my* business to tell her, not yours! Oh, Charles, Charles, how could you tell her such a—such a thing?"

"Nonsense. After all, she's married, and—well, why shouldn't she know? What's the good of trying to make a secret of it, when I know, and you know?"

"I *was* going to tell her, Charles. There are many things I meant—and still mean—to tell her, but I wanted to do it in my own way, at my own time— How could I tell her these last months? And I had no right to tell her until he actually *told* me. But the moment he did tell me I meant to tell her, indeed I did."

"And I, as usual, have spilled the beans! Well, I'm sorry, but there's no use," he ended with a laugh, "in crying over spilt beans."

She looked at him with amazement and consternation in her face.

"You don't seem to realize," she said, slowly, "that it's serious. *Extremely* serious, Charles. Do you realize that I have only been waiting for her to get well——"

"Poor old girl," he broke in, "don't you worry! I don't want to be told the poor devil's troubles. If they could be helped, yes, for I'm very fond of old Vincent. But as we can't help him, why—sort of crystallize things by talking about them?"

"But, my dear, we *must* talk about them," she returned frowning. "Disregarding a fact doesn't do away with it! You don't seem to realize——"

"I do, Gracie. I realize perfectly!" he broke in. "But Nanny's waiting for you, and I must stretch my legs a bit. I won't go to Vincent's now, of course, but I'll go and walk for an hour. Come on, Tanq——"

He had been driven by that queer need of his for comfort, to open the subject with her, but now he had had enough talk, and it upset him that she, his so reserved and silent wife, should show signs of emotionality, and a disposition for discussion. A disposition so unusual in her that it made him shy and uncomfortable.

Without another word he left her abruptly and went out into the dusky coming-on of night.

CHAPTER THREE

ON the morning after his talk with his wife about their daughter, Charles Beville woke unusually early, while his dog still snored on his cushion, and his cat slept silently at his feet.

The sky beyond his two big, unshaded windows was still only a degree lighter than the uniform dark grey of the room, and very little noise from outside competed with the slow tick of the old clock opposite the foot of his bed.

He had slept uneasily, and now awoke to a renewed sense of vague trouble; something in his world was wrong, and he resented it.

Violet was queer, Gracie was—quite suddenly—even queerer; Bob, whom he liked, was nearly surly with him, and Nanny, who had always petted him, had not been particularly sympathetic when he told her his troubles.

And Vincent had treated him like a dog; Vincent, whom he had always loved.

‘This is Thursday,’ he mused, ‘and to-morrow they all go to Saucers and leave me here alone. No need at all for Gracie to go! She and I were to have gone together in a week or so, anyway, and now she has to go with Violet and Bob! And she *knows* I hate to be alone——’

‘I’ll go and see poor little Drusilla to-morrow. Take her out to dinner somewhere, and we’ll dance. Good morning, Mrs Tanqueray, I trust you slept well? No—leave Flannel alone, you jealous brute. Poor Dru, I haven’t treated her very well. Still, I *did* lend her that five hundred she wanted! “Lend!” Never get it back, of course. Not that that matters, luckily! Wonder if I’d better have it out with old Vincent? I’d like a squint at Gracie’s portrait, too. I hope he’s making her look

a bit younger than she does, poor dear, but as he's in love with Violet I suppose he thinks Gracie an old woman! I do myself, when I'm with Dru or Quincy, yet she's six and a half years younger than me! Than *I*, Quincy'd say. These Americans are so damned grammatical. And Vincent's—how old? Forty-six. Really a *young* man for anyone but a girl of twenty-three. Wonderfully keen Edith was about that screen. Well she looked, too, in that grey gown. "Frock." She thinks I don't know she's had her hair touched up, but I do! And she makes up a bit, too. I wish Gracie would. No, I don't. Not Gracie's style. But it does improve Edith, by Jove, it does. I wonder Edith hasn't married again! That chap at the Italian Embassy'd marry her like a shot, and so would Wilfrid Babbacombe. I wonder if Edith ever remembers that evening three years ago? My God, wasn't I surprised! Lovely, she was, too. Never a word of reproach afterwards. It might never have happened. Only it *had*. Queer it's never made me feel any different towards her. Devil a bit, it hasn't! She looked so beautiful last night—by God, if she'd given me one look—only she didn't! Oddest thing in the world the way she's kept me in order ever since without saying a word. Oh, well—Gracie might put just a tiny bit of that black stuff on her lashes,' his thoughts wandered on. 'Hers are really longer than Edith's, but they don't show a bit! I wish Gracie'd tell me what poor old Vincent said, but she won't. But what I wish most of all is that I knew what's wrong with Violet. If it wasn't for Bob, I'd begin to wonder if she'd ever been in love with poor old Vincent! That's rot, of course, but he's only forty-six, and she's twenty-four, but then I'm twenty-four years older than Dru, and Dru certainly loves me! I wonder why Violet said she rather wished Vincent *was* in love with her? Oh, well, wondering's a mug's game——'

As the light strengthened, bringing shape to the furniture in the room, he sat there struggling to shepherd

the unruly flock of his thoughts. 'But Gracie knows about Vincent, and she isn't upset about it— And Violet *does* love Bob. Anyone can see that. A fellow any girl could love. Not like poor little Vincent——'

It was nearly seven now, and a pearly blue appeared in the sky, from the park came a gush of bird-song, and the silver poplar had shaken its green scrolls a little looser since the day before.

Beville went to the window and looked out. A lovely morning. What rubbish he'd been thinking! As if Violet, his incomparably lovely Violet, could waste the blossom of her heart on a poor little thing like Vincent! "Bosh," he said aloud, suddenly happy. "I *am* a damned fool! Still, it was only an idea; I didn't really believe it, of course. I'll have my bath and go and breakfast with her."

.

Half an hour later as, followed by Mrs. Tanq, he crossed the passage leading to Violet's room, he was met by Nurse Widgeon. "Oh, Sir Charles, how odd! I was just coming to wake you and ask you to come and see Mrs. Quintana! She is anxious to see you at once."

"Good! I'll have breakfast with her, Nurse—with your kind permission!"

"Oh, of course. But—you won't mind my telling you that I hope you don't say anything to—to *excite* Mrs. Quintana? She hasn't slept well, and seems a bit nervous, to me——"

Beville stood still, a really rather splendid figure in his gaudy dressing-gown. "Nothing *wrong*?" he asked, sharply, and on her replying that it was only just what she had told him, he went on and knocked at the door.

The sun had come out, and filled the high-up room with gaiety, and Violet was banked up by many pillows, her black, sleek hair brushed flat to her head, a rose-coloured

silk and lace jacket lending a faint flush to her queer little face.

"Oh, father, darling," she began at once, "I'm so glad to see you. I've been thinking about you nearly all night."

"Instead of sleeping? You ought to be ashamed of yourself! Well, here I am, and I've come to breakfast. Have you had yours?"

He rang as he spoke, and then drawing a low chair to the bed, sat down gingerly in it, testing it by a series of slow movements.

"I've been awake for hours, myself," he went on when he had ordered breakfast, "and I was thinking about *you* most of the time, too! Great minds——"

Mindful of the nurse's warning he was trying to keep to surface chat, but she would have none of it.

"Mother," she began gravely, "told me about your talk with her after tea yesterday, and—she and I have had a long talk last night, father. A very important talk——"

"I know, I know! About Vincent. She and I nearly quarrelled about him! It was absurd, but I've rarely seen her so angry."

"Mother is very fond of Vincent."

"Of course she is. He has always been my best friend, and for years—ever since our marriage—they have liked each other. And got on together. Two high-brows, you see, and I the low-brow Idiot! His liking the same things she does—music, and books, and plays—I've been jolly thankful," he added sincerely, "that she *had* such a friend."

Violet nodded. "So have I. You *were* pretty hopeless for her, with your musical-comedy artistic ideals, weren't you?"

"I *was*. Never pretended to like really *good* things, but I know what I like. Well, what's all this about Vincent telling her about—about you?"

John, bringing in breakfast as he spoke, and setting the table at the bedside, heard some talk about Mr. Quintana's return, and the journey to Saucers in the Rolls that had

been Sir Charles's wedding-gift to his daughter. John was able to tell interested folk below-stairs that Miss Violet's room at Saucers sounded a treat. And Nurse Widgeon, two hours later, told Lady Grace that Mrs. Quintana had done fairly well at breakfast, and that Sir Charles had eaten what amounted, practically, to two breakfasts.

But when the table had been cleared and put back in its corner, and Nurse had taken advantage of Sir Charles's promise to stay with her patient until ten, to go for a walk and try to get rid of a headache, Violet spoke.

"Darling," she began, taking his hand between hers, and gazing at him with a mature gravity he had never before seen in her eyes, "you asked me about mother's telling me about Vincent. Well, I've something to tell you about—not only about Vincent, but about all of us!"

"About all of us?" He watched her quietly, and saw that she was very pale. "Go on, my darling," he returned. "Don't be nervous——"

She drew a deep breath. "You said yesterday that you thought Vincent was in love with me," she went on with an effort, "and I said I hoped he was. Didn't that make you wonder? Didn't you guess *why* I hoped that?"

Beville's heart seemed literally to turn over and then hang loose in his breast.

"Great God," he whispered, streaks of floury-looking white appearing in his ruddy face, "you can't mean——"

His anguished eyes spoke for him, and with a violent, indignant blush she cried: "What? *You* can't mean that you think I ever loved poor Vincent—in that way? Oh, father," she added, "how *could* you think I'd have married Bob, if I did?"

"Oh, get on with it," he cried, frantic with sudden terror. "I've not the slightest idea what you are driving at. For God's sake get on with it!"

"Well, then. It's this. I've been afraid of it for a long time, and now she's told me," she answered slowly. "Vincent loves mother. Always has."

"Vincent loves—you're out of your senses," he cried with a harsh laugh. "I never heard of such a thing in my life!"

Rising quickly, he stood unconsciously making himself as tall, as broad, as he possibly could, and the gesture was so innocently boastful, that, for all her misery, his daughter had to bite her lip to keep from laughing. "That's an abominable thing to say," he added, pompous and tragic in his struggle to disbelieve the truth.

"It isn't abominable, darling," she protested pitifully. "It's true, and you mustn't blame him. He's been simply splendid about it, he never said a word to her until the day after the baby was born——"

"What on earth had the baby to do with a piece of—of gross impertinence like that? And to think," he sputtered, furiously disregarding her words, "that I *trusted* him! He was my friend, and I trusted him."

Then, to his horror—to something in him that was singularly like fear—she did laugh. "Oh, father," she gasped, "don't! Don't be so awfully funny!" And she began to cry quietly.

"Funny? Upon my soul, I believe the whole lot of you has gone mad," he roared, for the first time in his life disregarding her tears. "You and your mother—even Nanny! What," he went on, unconsciously Shakespearian, "is the matter? Besides the poor little devil's being—in love? Why are you crying? Tell me exactly what—what your mother told you."

"That's why I sent for you," she answered, wiping her eyes and speaking very low. "You see, darling, mother was going to tell you to-day, and I thought—somehow I thought it might be easier for you if I told you——"

"And so it would be," he snapped, "if you'd *tell* me, instead of beating round the bush! What more is there to know? Of course, I can imagine your mother being furious, but——"

He sat down, drew a deep breath, and pulling himself

together, tried to smile. "Remember," he added, "that I'm a thick-skulled brute. Give it to me in words of one syllable."

"Very well, then. Father," she went on almost in a whisper, her thin face haggard, "mother isn't furious at all. You see—she is going to divorce you and marry Vincent."

He stared at her, his eyes almost without intelligence. "Going to divorce me?" he repeated. "But why?"

"Because," returned his daughter painfully and slowly, "you have always been so unfaithful to her."

There was a pause, and then Charles Beville, the bones of his rather gross face suddenly clearly marked, said in a very quiet voice: "I did not know she knew."

"Oh, yes, father. She always knew."

"Poor Gracie."

Then Violet Quintana broke down again, this time utterly, crying without noise, but unable to control her tears, while her father stood with folded arms, afraid to try to comfort her because he was ashamed to touch her.

Believers in the transmigration of souls would, on watching them, have said that this was a new, crude soul, and that his daughter's was old and wise, for presently she wiped her eyes and held out her arms to him. "Come here, darling," she said, "you *poor* darling——"

And he obeyed, kneeling by the bed and letting her put her frail arms round his neck, and draw his bewildered, shamed head to her innocent breast.

"I'm so *sorry* for you, dear," she whispered; "so awfully sorry."

He was so grieved, so appalled, so sick with horror that she should know, that for a moment he nearly lost consciousness, with his face pressed to her soft flesh.

He could not have conceived of anything so intolerably hurting him; the pain seemed unbearable.

And then gradually he regained his self-control, and drawing back, he smoothed his hair, his big hands shaking.

"There doesn't seem," he said quietly, "much for me to say."

"No, darling. But there are one or two more things for *me* to say. May I?"

"Go on, my dear, go on——"

She took his hand again, and as she spoke she stroked it, in and out between his big fingers, and over the wrist-veins, as she had done as a child.

"You're being shocked," she went on, "because I know. And that, at least, you need not be. You see, Charles, I've known for over a year and a half, so I'm—sort of used to it."

He stared at her. "So *that* was it! That's why you've been so—different!"

"Yes."

"But—in God's name, Violet, who told you?"

"No one. I was asleep on His Ex.'s balcony that afternoon—you remember? I fainted outside his door and fell down the steps to the morning-room——"

"Do I remember? Good God!"

"You see, I had been reading on the chaise-longue on his balcony, and I fell asleep. And when I woke up, mother was there, sitting by his bed, telling him about—Mrs. Lester Anthony."

"Oh, my *dear*——"

"I was trying to creep across to the Tapestry-Room window, when she—named a lot of other people. Women. She was crying, and had lost her self-control, and His Ex. was trying to quiet her. It frightened me, father," the girl added, "to have mother like that. She was always so—so calm. I really was afraid——"

"I don't wonder. Poor Gracie."

"She said she was going to leave you, but he said no. He said," she drew a deep breath, "that she must wait till I was married."

"And she did wait."

"Yes, she waited. Then," she resumed after a pause,

"I got into the Tapestry-Room window, and started down the little flight of stairs, and—something gave way in my head, and down I pitched. So now," she ended, "you know! You have wondered what had happened to me—I've *seen* you wondering—and now you know."

For a while he did not speak, and then he said slowly: "Your mother is justified in doing whatever she likes, but—she *can't*—care for poor little Vincent Lundy, Violet! It's impossible."

"I don't think so, darling. You must remember that mother—and I—aren't giants like you. Vincent doesn't seem so—so *little*—to us, as he does to you. You seem to think he's a dwarf, or deformed, but he's not——"

"Good heavens, it was you who invented his 'invisible hump'! And it isn't only that he's *short*; he's—he's positively fragile. His wrists and ankles aren't any bigger than yours!"

"His head is splendid, father," was her quiet retort, "and he is a very intellectual man, and a fine artist."

"And I'm six foot four of imbecile brawn. Oh, I know! Your mother made it quite clear yesterday, even to *my* mean intelligence. However——"

He rose. "I hear Nurse in her room, my dear, so I'll go. I—I'd like to be alone for a bit, and think things over——"

"Kiss me good-bye, dear. Oh, father," her voice again broke, "I'm so dreadfully sorry!"

"Don't be sorry for me, I'm not worth it," he returned sombrely.

"It's not exactly that I'm sorry for *you*, for if you'd loved her, you'd—have been different. But—we used to be a family. We were an 'US', and now we'll be all separate——"

"Hush, my darling," he said gently, "I hear your baby. She wants her mummy, and mummies mustn't cry at breakfast-time——"

"I know. Come again when—when you can, will you? I wish I could have told you *better*."

"You told me beautifully, my poor child. I'm too stupid to put it into the right words, but—I am sick with shame, Violet."

A quiet smile changed her face. "Oh, Charles! Because of what you've done, or because I know?"

He did not smile in return, but stood frowning, trying to think.

"I'm afraid it's chiefly because you know," he said at length, "but—I *am* ashamed, too, for having so hurt your mother—and all those years, too. I had," he added in a different voice as Nurse came in with the baby, "no idea that she knew——"

.

Charles Beville had in his day been a fine amateur heavy-weight boxer, and he played a good game of golf, but his favourite form of exercise had always been walking.

A very heavy man, though as yet his waistcoat had barely begun to bulge, he had never much cared for hunting, and indeed few horses were up to his weight, whereas his big, carefully-shod feet could and did carry him across country or through streets for hours without fatigue, and his average walk, even in town, was well over ten miles a day. And he possessed the wisdom, unusual in a self-indulgent, unoccupied middle-aged man, of taking any trouble for a walk, instead of inviting it to partake of drinks with him. So that splendid April morning he left St. James's Place by the tunnel leading into the park, crossed Piccadilly, and made his way via Oxford Street and Portman Square to St. John's Wood, and thence to Hampstead Heath.

The lovely old gardens of St. John's Wood were already gay with the delicate leafage of an early, warm spring, the ancient forest trees that had in their long lives seen so much, given shade to such varied types and classes of people, spread their jade-green lace against a blue, cloud-flecked

sky; old ladies waddled heavily along, towed by overfed old dogs; a young girl, leading a huge Newfoundland, laughed aloud as she leaned back against his dragging weight, the leash as taut as a telegraph-wire.

A man pushed a cart laden with pots of daffodils and tulips, crying his delicate wares in a husky gin-voice; some mounted soldiers trotted along, the horses' hoofs making a lovely sound, and a group of little girls marched by, solemn as to gait but merry as to eye, herded by a wax-faced, pretty young nun.

And Charles Beville, who, despite his lack of artistic tastes, always noted and enjoyed the charming things he passed in his long tramps, to-day saw none of them.

His untrained mind, so unused to thought, so given to rambling, inconsequent picturings, was now black with a kind of childish horror. Violet knew.

Later, his regrets about his wife's suffering would, he was dimly aware, intensify and cause him well-deserved pain, but for the moment he could really realize only the one appalling, world-shaking horror. That Violet knew.

His groping thoughts were without cohesion. He was, in his helpless inability to range and classify the items of the disaster that had overwhelmed him, face to face with a series of mental pictures. He saw, as he strode on between the old gardens of Abbey Rood, old Lord Westerham in the great bed in the Blue Room; a thin, high-featured old man with the lines of a lifetime of ironic perception engraved in his thin face, his silver hair beautifully brushed, his crimson brocade dressing-gown hanging on his bony shoulders and disposed in neat folds on the counterpane. Flowers on his bedside table. Flowers, and books, and one or two high-brow monthlies.

And by him, her self-control broken and scattered by grief, her pale face swollen with tears as he, her husband, had never actually seen it, Gracie sat by her father, telling him her trouble.

'Alice Anthony, Violet said. Damn it, what did I ever

care for Alice Anthony? A horrible woman. And—that was in August, '99—she will have known then about the Sant' Andrea, and Eleonor Percival, and—my God—' Here he stood still, and the laughing girl with the Newfoundland passed him unseen. 'Can she have heard about Dora and the boys? Poor Dora, she's the most decent of the lot, when all's said and done—' . . . And while Gracie told the horrid, vulgar tale to His Ex., there was poor little Violet—*his* Violet—crouching in that red-and-white chaise-longue on the balcony, hearing it all. And she had loved him.

He was a man of scant vocabulary, and he did not consciously use the word worship, but it was worship that his daughter had felt for him, and he knew it. 'What was it that Nanny said? "A gentleman can kill a feeling."' That was what he had done. His daughter had loved and worshipped him; she had trusted him; he had been to her a good man—probably the best man in the world; and by that unhappy chance of her falling to sleep on her grandfather's balcony, she had suddenly seen her idol as he really was.

'A stupid, idle, sensual idiot. That's what I am, and that is what she found out that day, and that is what made her unhappy, and ill, and different. So now she loves me as good women do love weak fools of men. Like a mother, damn it! Yes, that was what she was like when she put her arms—her poor, bony little arms like a bird's legs—round my neck and pulled my head down to her——'

A miserable, hot blush burnt his thick neck at the thought.

'She'll never really love me again, and I've lost her for—*what?*'

His thoughts, like most people's thoughts when unuttered, were crudely expressed, for he had loved none of the women with whom he had betrayed his wife. He had never felt guilty about these passing adventures—such men as he, healthy, full-blooded, and unimaginative, rarely

do feel guilty—but the fact that his daughter could now envisage him as he really was, put him in a kind of Hell that moved with him as he walked. ‘Violet must despise him. Good women did despise men such as he. . . . And as to Gracie—why hadn’t Gracie told him? About Alice, for instance, or that Italian, or Eleonor, or Marion Orme-Blakely?’

He stood still for a moment, and a little dog on a leash came and tied and untied itself, unnoticed by him, round his legs. ‘Well, *that* was one way to look at it! Gracie should have told him! It had been very wrong of Gracie not to tell him that she knew. Deceitful, it had been, to go on just as usual, not saying a word, letting him think she didn’t know. For, of course, if she *hadn’t* known, she wouldn’t have been hurt! I wouldn’t have hurt Gracie,’ he told himself with a characteristic clutching at self-approbation, ‘for anything in the world! God knows I wouldn’t—’

This reflection comforted him somewhat. ‘Alice Anthony was deuced attractive,’ his mind wandered on, ‘but I’d have given her up like a shot if Gracie had asked me to. She *should* have asked me to! I wonder Violet doesn’t realize that; that Gracie should have told me she knew? Poor old George Carstairs ran as straight as a die for *years* after Eva caught him out about that girl at the “Gaiety”—’

Thus comforted, he drew a deep breath and turned back.

He would see Gracie at once, and make her understand that this wretched situation was largely her fault. And Violet. Violet, too, must be made to understand. But here his heart fell again. Violet was different. Alas!—

He stopped at Solomon’s on his way home, and bought a great sheaf of freesias and violets for Violet. He would take them to her, and then he would see Gracie—

It was nearly twelve when he reached home, and Lady Grace was out.

“Where’d she go, Domenico? Do you know?”

Hailing a taxi, he hastened off to King's Road, Chelsea, to explain to Gracie how much she had been to blame in not telling him that she knew of what by this time he was again regarding as his peccadilloes. In relation to Violet they were, oddly, sins: abominable and shameful sins; but to his wife, who had ill-treated and deceived him by her silence, they were once more mere peccadilloes. 'And,' he told himself as the taxi hurried across Hyde Park Corner, 'I'll tell Vincent what I think of *him*, as well——'

For Vincent, whom he had loved and trusted, had now stolen his wife from him. Vincent was a reptile.

CHAPTER FOUR

EARLY in the century some wise builder built, in Spate Street, Chelsea, a big, square, solid house containing six sets of studio flats.

He chose, that sensible and long-headed man, fine red bricks with which to make his house, and he built it solidly and square, attempting no external beauty but that of proportion, thus achieving for his work a lasting dignity not unworthy of Nash himself.

And here, on the top floor, looking from the very small bedroom down into a square, flagged courtyard where throve two old forest trees and a fine pink May, had for the past quarter of a century lived Vincent Lundy.

He was a man of extreme sensitiveness to noise, and once inside his door all noise ceased, for the walls were thick and sound-proof; he was a reserved, proud man, intensely French in some of his ways, and a less clubable man never lived, so even now he was on terms of only the most hurried bows with the other inmates of the studios, two of whom were painters, two writers, and the third a bed-ridden blind man, a war-wreck.

Like many artists, Lundy was extremely indifferent to physical surroundings, and he had not changed the bedroom when he took over No. 6 from its first inhabitant. It was a small room with yellow-washed walls, a white enamel bed elaborated with hideous brass knobs, a fine old chest-of-drawers with a modern green-and-gilt shaving-glass on it, and a brown drugget. It also contained a complicated "gentleman's wardrobe" as envisaged by the Tottenham Court Road in 1903; an elaborate inlaid mahogany contraption with shelves, hangers that swung out, a kind of brass arm that also swung out, and on which Lundy's meagre assortment of ties looked rather forlorn,

and a contrivance for boots and shoes that, having baffled his first efforts to solve its mysteries, he had henceforth ignored.

A picture of his long-dead mother, painted when he was sixteen, hung opposite the bed, at the head of which was nailed an extremely lovely old Spanish holy-water receptacle that was never empty.

On the nail that secured the *bénitier* also hung a worn rosary of large brown beads: his mother's.

Opposite this ugly and not even simple bedroom was a good-sized bathroom, with an excellent shower that the Frenchman never used. And facing the front-door, another door led directly into the studio, a bare, high place forty by fifty feet in size, that contained a big red-brick fire-place with fine iron fire-dogs, and a South German stove of gleaming white tiles, which, even in the coldest winter, kept the big room warm.

The studio was unremarkable except insofar that it made no attempt to be remarkable; it was not a drawing-room; it was a workroom.

At the south end, near the fire-place, stood two comfortable but shabby arm-chairs, and at this end of the room were plain oak bookshelves crowded untidily with French, English, German, and Spanish books—chiefly French, and almost exclusively histories and biographies.

In careful relation to the great north light with its loose strips of grimy muslin slung on rusty wires, stood two or three easels and a low platform on wheels, and here the walls were covered with sketches and canvases of all subjects, sizes, and mediums.

For Vincent Lundy was very little beside a maker of pictures. He painted from morning to night, and there were few kinds of painting he had not tried.

For years he had painted only portraits; then came a period when nothing but water-colours attracted him, and when for months at a time he had wandered across Europe—chiefly in Portugal, that motherland of brooks and pools,

cascades and fountains—studying with silent passion the thousand aspects of the loveliest of elements.

Too delicate for the joys of knapsack-tramping, and at that time too poor to travel in comfort, he had wandered about in third-class carriages, eating whatever he could most easily get, stopping wherever he could find a roof and a bed, sketching in pencil, charcoal, water-colours, and oil, rising at dawn, and going to bed as soon as it was dark, a silent, saturnine-looking little man who often forgot to have his hair cut, and who, in those wanderings, never dreamt of shaving.

And because he was not only extremely gifted, but possessed of that quality of passionate patience that alone brings artistic gifts to their fruition, the man had learned to paint water as perhaps no one but John Sargent had ever painted it.

But though so fine an artist, he was the most inefficient of business men, and even now, at forty-six, with years of recognition behind him, he was poor—if indeed a man can be said to be poor whose very simple needs are always satisfied with ease.

That April morning, as Lady Grace Beville sat for the finishing touches to the portrait that was to be one of her wedding presents to her daughter, the remains of the artist's breakfast of coffee and rolls still littered a little table near the fireplace, where glowed a neglected fire, and a sheaf of narcissi, daffodils, and anemones, brought by his sitter, still stood in an ancient Portuguese faience bowl, waiting for him to separate and arrange them.

"You might have let Isabella arrange the flowers," Lady Grace observed as the clock struck twelve; "she's very good at it, you know——"

"She is. But I am better. I can't bear anyone to touch my flowers," Lundy replied, stepping back from his easel and looking at her with his hollow eyes half-shut. "Your hand an inch to the left, please, Gracie——"

He wore a queer, black-sleeved pinafore, such as Latin

schoolboys wear, and its front and sleeves were a wild mosaic of smears of paint. Lady Grace was dressed in deep blue velvet; one of her evening house-dresses, and an old one—the soft material having gained with time the kind of silvery bloom seen in ancient priestly garments—and over her thin shoulders was draped a bertha of exquisitely darned Mechlin lace. On her lap lay a ball of silver-grey wool in which two steel knitting-needles caught a high light and gleamed like jewels.

"Violet was right," the painter began after a long pause, "in choosing this gown. It is thus, Gracie, that if I were dying in the Sahara, or on an ice-floe at the North Pole, I should remember you——"

"It is a very old dress. I saw that Mrs. Paull looking at it with the greatest scorn, one evening when Angela Stanton's boy brought her in——"

"That' Mrs. Paull. *H'm*, yes!" Lundy smiled his queer, twisted smile that Violet called his Mephistophelian grin, his strong square teeth shining for a moment between his moustache and his grizzled beard. "She asked me to paint her, but I refused."

"That was foolish of you, wasn't it? She is rich, and would pay you well——"

"I don't like her; I should have made her look like a shark. She is a horrible woman——"

He painted on in the silence to which his sitter was so used.

The place was very quiet; Swallow, the ex-non-commissioned guardsman who managed the studios, was sweeping the bedroom, saying an occasional word to Isabella who, Gracie Beville knew, was hastily going through the artist's belongings, sewing on buttons, mending socks, and so on, without his permission or knowledge.

Presently Lady Grace's thoughts returned again to her talk the night before with her daughter, and she realized that Lundy must be told about it.

"Vincent," she said quietly, without allowing her expression to change, "I have told Violet."

He stood still, his brush poised over the canvas like a live thing about to dart, his untidy black eyebrows corrugated. "About—us?"

"Yes. About Charles, and you, and me."

"Good. I am glad."

He was, she knew, not only glad, but deeply moved, but for a few moments he went on painting in silence, as if she had said nothing.

Then, as his brush left her face for the background of the portrait, he spoke.

"Was she much upset?"

"Yes. She adores Charles, you know——"

"But you, of course, told her *why* you were divorcing him?" he asked, a faint red flushing his hollow cheeks.

"Of course I told her. It was—rather dreadful, Vincent."

"I know. But it had to be done. Tell me just what she said, will you, Gracie?"

"She said very little. Very little indeed. I was surprised at her not saying more. But—she cried, Vincent. And—she so rarely cries——"

"You have cried. For years," he replied morosely, "you cried, and no one knew it. Except me. I knew it. My God," he added in French, his voice suddenly hoarse, "how I have hated him! How I have hated this man whom I love——"

"Poor Charles! . . . I shall," she said slowly, "have to tell *him* to-day. That will be bad, too, Vincent! I know it's foolish of me, but I can't say how I dread it."

"Then let me tell him!"

"No, no! Oh, no, my dear. That would be horrible. You would be so cruel to him!"

Lundy burst into a fierce short laugh like a bark. "How like you, Gracie. How utterly like you! The man has been breaking your heart—*shaming* you—for years, and

you fear that I—I, the wretched little weakling whom he despises—might be ‘cruel’ to him. *Mais que vous êtes incroyables, vous autres femmes!*”

“Charles loves you, Vincent,” was her quiet reply; “he has never despised you—how could he? It’s only that because he knows that he is in many ways a stupid man, he tries to—to make his superiority in size and strength a—a *real* superiority. When he stretches himself like the frog in the fable, and looks down at you, it shows a humility that hurts him and makes him ashamed. Oh,” she went on, with a queer little laugh, “I know my poor Charles!”

Lundy shrugged his shoulders, and took up the brushes he had put down.

“All the same, you ought to let me break the news to him, my beloved. *Allô*”—his voice changed abruptly—“what’s that?”

“That” was Beville’s quick, light footfall in the little entry, and as Lundy spoke the door opened and Beville came in.

“Oh, Charles,” the artist exclaimed. “Come in! We were just talking about you——”

“Were you, indeed! Morning, Gracie.”

“Come and tell me what you think of the picture,” Lundy went on hastily. “I don’t think I can do any more to it, Gracie, so if you really *do* want to hurry back to Violet——”

“I’ve not come,” Beville’s voice was sharp, his face very red, “to tell you what I think of the picture—*er*—Lundy. I’m here to tell you what I think of you.”

The Frenchman—for in emotional crises Marie Lundy’s son became entirely French—set his initials in black letters at one corner of the canvas, laid down his brushes and palette, slipped his blouse over his head, and put, in his mother tongue, what was less a question than a statement. “I see,” he said quietly, “Violet has already told you?”

“Yes, Violet told me this morning.”

"I am sorry she did, Charles. I was just telling Vincent that I myself should tell you to-day——"

"Be quiet, Gracie. This matter is between Vin—Lundy and me. You don't think I'm fool enough to blame *you*, do you?"

Then he added hastily: "At least, about this divorce business, which is perfectly preposterous. A—a ridiculous, impossible business——"

"Is there anything you *do* blame Gracie for, Charles Beville?" Lundy spoke sharply, his eyes full of angry light.

"*That* matter, Lundy, is between Gracie and me. And I might as well tell you about it now, Gracie. Hold your tongue, Lundy."

Lady Grace's long face had turned very pale, but she watched her husband with unbroken calm. "Go on, Charles. I should like to know—for I have done my best—for what you *do* blame me?"

"For what?" he burst out in a blaze of self-justification and rage. "For *what*? For fooling me. For deceiving me——"

"Mind what you say to Gracie, Charles!"

"And you mind your own business——"

"Gracie never deceived you by one word," pursued the indignant Frenchman. "How *dare* you accuse her of 'fooling' you? As God hears me, I never even told her I loved her until the day after the baby was born—she had no idea——"

"Be *quiet*," roared Beville, and then, at a sign from his wife, he remembered the vicinity of the caretaker and Isabella, and coming close to the platform, went on to her almost in a whisper, his back ostentatiously turned to Lundy. "Why did you not tell me that you *knew*? That you knew about—about those women and me? Why did you pretend to be just the same to me? Why didn't you let me know that I was hurting you? Oh, Gracie, if you had only *told* me——"

Lundy's uncontrollable laugh was to Beville like a blow, and but for Lady Grace's jumping from her chair and catching his arm with both her hands, he would have turned on the man who laughed.

"Hush, Vincent," she said hurriedly. "There is nothing to laugh at. As to that, Charles, I did *not* pretend to go on as usual. If you'll look back you'll remember that it was when you were 'in love' with that Spanish woman that I—that I—asked you to sleep in your dressing-room."

She had blushed, and the deep red lent a passing youth to her delicately-boned face.

He stared at her. "Yes," he answered slowly, "but you were *ill*. You told me you were ill, and MacPhail said——"

"Dr. MacPhail said exactly what I asked him to say."

"But surely—*surely*, Gracie," he cried, in sincerely indignant reproach, "you didn't tell MacPhail?"

So comic was he in his childishness that she bit her lip for a moment before she could say quietly: "I did, Charles. I was very unhappy, and I needed help, and I'd known him all my life——"

"*Humph!* And then you told His Ex. Well, upon my word, Gracie!"

"How do you know that I told Papa?"

"How do I know? Violet told me, of course," he returned, the first four words in a kind of a bellow, the last five in a hoarse undertone.

Lady Grace frowned in bewilderment. "But—I don't understand," she said slowly. "I didn't tell Violet I'd told Papa!"

"No, but she *heard* you! She was on the balcony, and heard. And," he added with gloomy satisfaction, "it was your telling him that made her fall downstairs—that made her ill, and unhappy, and *different*, the last eighteen months."

His wife stared at him, too amazed to collect her wits, and it was Lundy who spoke.

"Don't be an ass, Beville. Surely even you can see that it wasn't the fact of Gracie's confiding her unhappiness to Lord Westerham, but the unhappiness she *had* to confide, that made Violet so miserable? And it was you and your idiotic amourettes that caused Gracie's unhappiness. Pull yourself together and face things as they really *are*—for once in your life!"

Beville stood there, his feet apart, his head hanging, his big fists red with pressure, his eyes bulging and bloodshot.

"Of course, I was a fool," he conceded slowly, "but—not one of those women mattered a row of beans to me——"

"Oh, *hush*, Charles," Lady Grace cried sharply. "Can't you see that you're only making things worse and worse? If you had *loved* someone, it would have hurt me, but—it is so—so *disgusting* that you hadn't even that excuse! It—it was so degrading to you, and—so insulting to me——"

Lundy had suddenly withdrawn to the other end of the room, and was busying himself with the dying fire, clattering the poker loudly against the fire-dogs, so that Beville and his wife were practically alone there under the north window, whose merciless light made her look so much older and more haggard than she need have looked.

And a quick pity—the pity that in men of his kidney is so easy to arouse—surged up in him. (How very old she appeared, and how plain.)

"Look here, Gracie," he said, turning his back to Lundy, and nearly whispering, "I'm sorry. I'm *damned* sorry, my dear! I'm a fool, and—and worse; I behaved vilely to you, and I beg your pardon. Yes, I do. I beg your pardon. Let's cut it all out and begin over, shall we? I promise I'll be different in the future. Word of honour. Let's go home—now, this very minute—and tell Violet. She'll be *delighted*, Violet will! It'd have been horrid for her to have her father and mother divorced. Just think of the scandal! Come along, darling," he urged, taking

her hands and smiling his most beguiling smile at her, "let's cut our losses and begin over!"

Tears gathered on her lashes and veiled the pale blue of her eyes; she was very white, and her thin lips quivered as she gazed earnestly at him.

But she had made up her mind. "No, Charles," she said gravely, "we can't. It's too late for that. I'm sorry—I'm very sorry for Violet, and for you, but I have thought about it for a long time and I have made up my mind."

"But—you can't love Vincent!"

He had forgotten Vincent's nearness, and Vincent, hearing his words, and a degree paler than before, again joined him and his wife, his urgent eyes on her face.

"I do love Vincent," she answered. "For years and years—while you neglected me—he has been the best and dearest of friends to me. I can't bear to think of what might have happened but for him, for I suffered horribly, Charles. You nearly killed me. And he was always there, always kind, never saying a word that he should not have said to his friend's wife, but—but just keeping me from utter desperation. And though I'd kept my promise to Papa, and waited till Violet was married, I was planning all the time to—to divorce you. Naturally I couldn't tell Violet till the baby was born, but I was only waiting for that, and then—I intended just to make the best I could of the rest of my life."

"And Vincent——"

"And Vincent," put in Lundy quietly, "did not mention his love until Gracie had told him about the divorce—or, indeed, for a full year *after* she told him. I haven't had an altogether easy time, Charles," he added, and there was a pause.

"It was when I found out about that horrible little actress—Mrs. Battle, who is so utterly vile, Charles, such a—disgusting person—that I told Vincent I could bear no more and—about the divorce, but even then he—he didn't

say a word about himself. Not till the day after the baby was born."

"You see? All those years I watched her suffer, and—held my tongue. Listen, *mon pauvre vieux*—" Lundy laid his thin, beautiful hand on the other man's arm, "let's be sensible. You and I have been friends ever since we were very young men. I have loved you—though I have hated you for hurting Gracie. Let's see this thing through like two gentlemen. Gracie, I *know*, would never take you back. Would you, Gracie?"

"No. Never."

"And you *must* want her to be happy. You're too good a fellow, for all your—nonsense—not to want her to be happy, and——"

"Gracie is my wife," broke in Beville stubbornly. "And you, as a Roman Catholic, ought to know that marriage is a sacrament——"

"Oh, *mon Dieu!*" cried Lundy, throwing up his arms. "Oh, *mon Dieu! Mon Dieu!*" And he burst into irrepressible, ironic laughter.

Grace Beville drew a deep breath, biting her lip hard, but she did not laugh, while her husband glared furiously first at her, then at the Frenchman.

"What a fool you are, Lundy," he stammered. "This situation doesn't strike *me* as funny at all!"

"*Non, non!* Nor is it funny. But you, my poor Charles, *you* are funny! But forgive me for laughing; I beg your pardon," and with a little, quiet bow, Lundy was again grave.

"Well, that's all right, but—a sacrament is a sacrament, and even if—if my wife really does want to marry——"

"A 'poor little wretch' like me? Go on——"

"To marry you, I don't see how you can marry her! What," Beville ended in triumph, "about the Pope?"

This he felt to be a bright idea; a happy thought. "What would the Pope say to your marrying a divorced woman?"

"I admit the difficulty, Charles," returned the French-

man without a smile, "but there are ways and means—Leave the Saint Père to me, Beville, if you don't mind, will you? And now may I remind you that it's a quarter past one?"

Lady Grace nodded. "I'll go and change, Charles, and then we may as well go—home together? Violet mustn't know that—well, we *haven't* quarrelled, have we?"

"Quarrelled? Oh, *no*. Everything," Beville replied, heavily sarcastic, "in the garden's lovely. My wife is divorcing me, and going to marry the man I loved and treated as my best friend, but *I* have nothing to complain about! Oh, *dear*, no!"

She left the room, and after a moment's silence Lundy said gently: "Charles, don't be a fool. I loved and trusted you, too, God knows, until I found out how you were hurting Gracie——"

"Gracie should have told me. Told me that she knew," broke in Beville, grasping again at his cherished excuse. "If she'd told me, I'd—I'd have stopped."

"Nonsense." A look of fastidious disgust came to Lundy's face. "Nothing could have made you stop. But—I want you to believe that though I am a poor little wretch with an invisible hump," he went on, his voice full of bitterness, "I can do what you can't do. I can love. I know how to love, Charles. I have loved Gracie ever since your marriage, and now I am going to make her happy. Won't you," he added, trying to smile, "believe this?"

But Beville frowned and drew back from him. "I consider that you are behaving abominably," he said. "I am appalled—and ashamed—of Gracie and of you. I will never forgive either of you. Never."

"*Grand Dieu!* You forgive Gracie?"

"Yes. And I won't. And I'm not going home. I shall lunch at my club. You can tell her that, will you?"

"Yes, I will tell her, but—" Lundy hesitated and then went on slowly, lighting a French cigarette, "I assure you, my poor friend, that she has made up her mind."

"Made up her mind to what? To disgracing my home and her own! My God, what would poor old Westerham say if he knew?"

"But he *does* know. She told you that. She explained the whole situation to him a few weeks before he died, and he understood that she could—that she *ought*—not to go on putting up with your—treatment of her. Be quiet, Charles," he added with a quick gesture of command, "let me finish. All Lord Westerham asked was that she should go on—enduring in patience until Violet was married. Now for God's sake, get these facts—*ces faits irréfutables*—into your head. And get into your head as well the fact that Gracie *is* going to divorce you, and going to marry me. Mr. Magwood will explain all the technicalities to you, for he and Mr. Rivers—of Rivers and Underwood—have had two long conferences about the matter. The petition is to be filed at once, and the case will be heard as soon as Rivers can arrange it."

Beville stared at him, something like fear in his eyes. "I see," he muttered slowly, "I see. Gracie might have waited a little, I think. Given me another chance——"

"Good God, man, she's waited for fifteen years! What *is* it that is wrong with you, Beville, that you can't *see* how abominably you have treated her, and how—how magnificent she has been?"

Into Beville's slow, untrained mind surged a flood of inarticulate indignation; indignation that, though he was unable to formulate it, he blindly felt to be justifiable.

"She—she never *told* me," he stammered. "If she'd told me, I—I might have changed, Vincent. I never dreamt I was hurting her. You see—I love Gracie."

Lundy gazed at him, his own eyes, so dark, so powerful in their gaze, so unlike the beautiful but almost child-like eyes in the other man's big face, full of compassion.

"Poor Charles," he said gently, "I am horribly sorry for you. Before God I am. Only—so far as Gracie and you are concerned, things have come to the end. Try to see

that. You ought never to have married at all, I suppose—you are different from each other in the wrong way.”

“I know. She’s so clever, and so highbrow, and I’m a—duffer——”

There was now no bitterness in his voice; only misery.

“I used to try to like Bach, you know, and those Russian novels all about idiots and things, but I couldn’t, Vincent, I just couldn’t.”

“I know, I know——”

“And that painter fellow—Gauguin, and the one who sent his ear in a box to Gauguin—but I think them hideous——”

“Most people do, old fellow. I know just how you feel——”

The clock struck, and both men started, Beville’s animosity reviving.

“Just the same,” he went on doggedly, “Gracie should have told me. And I think it wasn’t fair, her never going to my kind of play, or reading my kind of books. I tried to like hers, but I’ll be damned if she ever even tried to like mine! Why, I like Arnold Bennett, and Wells—some of ’em—and that book of Galsworthy’s about a family—I forget the name—and *lots* of people like Wodehouse and Edgar Wallace. And I’ve seen the Duke of Connaught enjoying George Robey like billy-ho! And look at the brainy men who love the ‘Gaiety’ shows! No,” he finished, his momentary humility gone, “I’m not a complete nit-wit, after all, and she never even *tried* to like my things, and that wasn’t fair, I tell you!”

“You may be right, Charles, but—that isn’t the point. The point is that the divorce is to be started at once, and that—you had far better make the best of it. Come now, surely you will do that?”

Beville stared at the wonderfully lifelike portrait on the easel before him.

“That’s a splendid picture,” he said slowly. “It’s just

—her. 'That's the way she always looks—or *looked*, by Christ!—when I came home——'

"When you came home from—what?" Lundy's deep voice was stern; "from making love to every woman who momentarily attracted you—or who was momentarily attracted by you! No, Charles, it's no good. You haven't a leg to stand on. And—she'll be back in a moment—will you go and see Mr. Magwood this afternoon? He will explain to you."

"What's there to explain?"

"Well, there are certain formalities to be gone through with, you know——"

Suddenly an idea occurred to Beville, and his face, the flesh of which seemed in the last hour to have loosened itself from its bones, turned whiter.

"She—she won't be dragging any—any of my friends into the dirt, will she?"

"Some of your 'friends' would find themselves quite at home in the dirt, but—no. Gracie hasn't the slightest idea of naming any of these—ladies. Magwood will do what has now become usual; he will find a 'lady' with whom you will spend a night at some hotel."

The blood surged back into Beville's face. "How perfectly *disgusting*," he shouted. "I never heard of anything so beastly! And—I won't do it, I tell you. I'll be damned if I'll go to an hotel with a——"

"Charles! *Hush*." Lady Grace, ready for the street, had come into the studio. "Why speak so loud?"

"Well, I don't care," he stated sulkily, "I *won't*."

She sighed. "How odd you are! But never mind. I know that you will for Violet's sake help me get through the horrid business with as much—dignity as possible. And now—will you be very kind and come home to lunch with me, and spare Violet's feelings as much as you can? It will make her much happier if we can make her think we are being—friendly about it all—" She had touched the right chord.

After a pause during which, as he put his cigarette-case into his pocket, his hands perceptibly shook, he drew a deep breath, and took up his hat and stick.

"Right. Yes, we must—spare her as much as we can."

"Thank you, Charles. And it's only till to-morrow morning, you know——"

Nodding to Lundy, Beville marched pompously out of the room and out of the building, joining the old Italian maid at the door of Lady Grace's car.

"It looks," he said, elaborately gazing at the sky, as his wife came out, a moment later, "a little like rain——"

CHAPTER FIVE

JUST as the old Italian maid's presence in the car had been a relief to the Bevilles, so was, at luncheon, the presence not only of Bob Quintana, but of the thirteen-year-old Lord Westerham, Lady Grace's nephew.

This youth, a pleasant, red-headed little fellow as freckled as a turkey's egg, had come up from Harrow to see his dentist.

"I hadn't time to ring up, Auntie Gracie," he explained as she shook hands with him, "but I knew you'd not mind my blowing in for lunch— How are you, Uncle Charles?"

"Delighted, Tony. Have you been to see Mr. Bell?"

"I *have*. And left him what seemed at the time like the biggest half of me. You never saw such a snag in your life! I—I suppose," the little boy went on tentatively, a freckled paw half-way to a pocket, "you wouldn't care to see it?"

"Well, not till after luncheon, if you don't mind. Isn't Violet coming down, Bob?"

Quintana shook his head.

"No, she decided to have something in her room, Lady Grace. Nanny is with her. Dr. MacPhail was here an hour ago, and found her very well, but said she might as well save her strength for the long run down to-morrow—"

"Good. I'm sure that's wise. Let's go and eat, shall we?"

They crossed the wide hall into the dining-room, which, unlike the library, looked out into St. James's Place, and began their meal, the three grown-ups silently rejoicing that the youngster was there to relieve the strain under which they were all suffering.

"Bob knows, too, of course," mused Beville sombrely; "Violet'll have told him. And they'll have talked me over,

damn it. And Gracie and she have talked me over, and Gracie and Vincent, and Gracie and Bob, too, no doubt! Then MacPhail knows. . . . The servants, too, probably. *They* have ears all over. . . . I suppose that old brute Isabella is telling Domenico at this very minute what she heard at the studio this morning. Odd, his having made her jealous! . . . I wonder if Violet will tell poor old Nanny? It'll be a nasty shock for *her*, poor old girl. Always liked Nanny, and she's fond of me, too——'

Lady Grace, who told Quintana that she had a bad head, tried to eat, and listened patiently to Tony's tales of Harrow. '*Poor* Charles,' her mind ran on as she heard the cricket and football news, 'I don't believe he understands a bit. And how odd he looks. I never saw the bones in his face before!' . . . "Yes, Tony, that *was* splendid!" . . . 'Bob hates the whole thing; that's plain enough. And poor Violet. How dreadful it was to have to tell her—a mother to have to tell her daughter that! Only I suppose it was in a way a blessing that she knew—about *Charles*. It possibly saved her the worst shock, but how abominable that she should have heard me telling Papa! Poor child. . . . Strange that she didn't tell me last night about that. I suppose she was shy about it—' . . . "Won't you burst if you do, Tony?"

But bursting was one of the things that never occurred to the Earl of Westerham, and fearlessly he took another large helping of salmon mayonnaise.

'Damn the fellow, thought Quintana irately, with a gloom-filled glance at his father-in-law, 'I don't see how he has the effrontery to face any of us, and there he goes stodging away exactly as usual! Marvellous of Violet to tell him this morning. My God, but she's brave. Yet how she cried afterward! . . . Never saw anyone sob so in my life. Poor darling, I *shall* be thankful to get her away from all the mess. Saucers is so quiet and so beautiful, she will get well there——'

And old Domenico, padding silent-footed round the

table, as he gave them all to eat and to drink, watched them unobtrusively, his subtle mind hard at work the while.

'Her poor ladyship looks very distressed. She is an angel, and she suffers. And he, great stupid, he, too, suffers, which is good! My old woman has been right from the beginning, but that is because she brushes her lady's hair; the maid who brushes her lady's hair sees much in the mirror. She sees the face of a lady alone—or who feels herself to be alone, which is the same thing. . . . *Il Signore* ought not to take his own car when he goes to see his 'friends'. Clegg is an intelligent young man, and he knows who lives in those different houses. And Clegg is not discreet; he talks. Coney loves his master, but Clegg gets things out of him, for Coney is a stupid Englishman, and when he drinks he betrays things that no valet ought to betray. . . . That *Signora* Paull. *E semplicemente una putana*—may Our Lady forgive me for using such a word! *Si, una putana.* . . . And the pretty little lady to whom by God's grace I opened the door that evening, and who was drunk! She, too, wanted Sir Charles. How I lied, per Bacco, to get her to go away, and our poor master and his own dear lady in the library, no farther away than a cat can jump! . . . Ah, yes, it is all very sad; very sad indeed. I will give *il piccolo Signor* Lord another helping of strawberries; at his age the legs are hollow—'

When luncheon was over, Beville opened the library door and stood back for his wife to pass him, but she did not do so.

"No, thanks, Charles," she said quietly, "I am going up to the drawing-room. You are seeing Mr. Magwood this afternoon, aren't you? He said he would be in at half-past three—"

Beville glared at her, as Quintana and Tony went upstairs to Violet's room. "Oh, he did, did he? You have made an appointment for me, have you? How extremely—thoughtful of you!"

"It wasn't I," she answered. "Violet had Bob ring him up after you left her. She—she entirely agrees with me, you know."

She led the way slowly up the broad, shallow stairs, and he followed her into the great drawing-room, and closed the door.

The room extended across the back of the house, three big french-windows opening on to the balcony that stretched unbroken from one end of the façade to the other. It was a splendid room, and it was beautiful, but it was not a room in which to live, and this generation of Bevilles had never lived in it. Its magnificent Aubusson carpet was covered with well-spaced islands of authentic French furniture, some of the first Empire, some dating back to the more graceful days of the fifteenth Louis, and the hangings, of rich, sea-green satin brocade, had, too, been woven in France, in the later half of the seventeenth century.

"Why d'you come up here?" asked Beville curiously. "You always hated it. Even my mother never could bear it—though I believe Queen Victoria admired it——"

Lady Grace sat down in a huge brocade *bergère* whose gilt carving, a little rose-coloured from age, glimmered softly in the pale sunlight.

"The library makes me sad," she said with gravity. "Besides, I shall not be coming back here after to-morrow, you know."

"That's damn nonsense," he cried hotly. "I beg your pardon, Gracie! Even if you carry out your outrageous plan of—of divorcing me—I shouldn't dream of taking your home from you. You must live here; this house must be yours for your life. I'll get a flat somewhere."

"George Campion-Beville might have a word to say about my having the house for my life," she returned quietly. "But—in no case could I go on living here, thought it is kind—and like you, Charles—to suggest it."

"Ho! I'm kind, am I? I thought I was a monster."

He had taken a vase from a table, and stood twisting the fragile thing in his big hands.

"No one has called you a monster. But," her voice changed, and she rose, "I came in here to ask two favours of you. Firstly—please do not say anything more about *us*—to Violet, until she is quite strong. Bob says she cried most terribly this morning after you left her, and she really is very del—I mean she really isn't quite strong yet. She'll be coming up to town before long, to see Sir Lindsay, and then you and she can have a long talk. . . . Will you do this, Charles?"

"Yes, I suppose so. What's the other 'favour' you want from me?"

He had set the little vase back in its place, and was walking beside her towards the door.

"Only—to get all the necessary explanations from Mr. Magwood—not from me. It—it makes me very unhappy to talk about it, and besides, I don't understand legal matters at all well myself. Mr. Rivers told me all about it last week, but even now I haven't got it straight——"

"All right. I'll see Magwood. Only—what's the awful hurry, Gracie? You seem to be rushing me, and I don't like it. Can't you wait—say, three months? I'll do what you say, of course, in the end, but why not take a little time to consider?"

His puzzled, sad face moved her deeply, but her decision was unalterable.

"No, Charles," she answered gently, "there's no good in waiting. My mind is absolutely made up, and Violet—and Bob, and Vincent, and Uncle Cyprian—all agree that the sooner it's over, the better."

"My God," he cried, aghast, "you haven't told Uncle Cyprian!"

"Of course I have. And—he thinks I have waited quite long enough. So you see——"

"Oh, yes, I see. The duke *never* liked me; I've always known that——"

She opened the door, and at the head of the stairs she turned.

"I am so sorry to hurt you," she went on, "and I am surprised that it *does* hurt you. I knew you'd dislike the divorce, but I had no idea you would be—unhappy about—about my leaving you——"

"Good God! Why shouldn't I be unhappy about it? We've been married nearly twenty-five years, you've been my *wife*—you *are* my wife! And you didn't expect me to be unhappy about it? Upon my word, Gracie," he ended, speaking more quietly, "you amaze me. You really don't seem quite human!"

As he spoke the telephone bell rang, and the footman at once appeared to answer it.

"Don't go to Violet now, will you?" Lady Grace asked him, and as he said no, John came up the stairs.

"Miss Battle, Sir Charles, wishes to speak to you. She said it's very urgent——"

.

There is no doubt that Sir Charles Beville felt extremely pleased with himself, as he left his house ten minutes later, for having refused to go to Little Berkeley Place to see Miss Drusilla Battle.

'I was curt with her, too,' he reflected, as he marched along up St. James' Street, 'deuced curt. Now Gracie wouldn't believe that; nor Vincent! Their idea of me is that I'm such a sensual ass that I can't resist any woman! And Dru is a damned attractive woman, too. "No," I said; "I can't come to-day. I'm busy." Just that. She *was* surprised. 'Poor little Dru, she's much fonder of me than I deserve. Well—' At the top of the street he hailed a taxi.

"Drive me," he said, "to 123B Chancery Lane."

The sun had suddenly gone in, and the sky was leaden with lowering clouds, and by the time the taxi reached

the Fleet Street end of Chancery Lane, it had begun to rain.

'I'll put it to old Magwood,' Beville's thoughts ran on. "'Here's my idea," I'll say. "If my wife really wants a divorce I suppose she must have one. I want her to be happy, and as I don't seem able to make her so, I must clear out—" That's what I'll say. Only I wonder if Magwood knows about Lundy? I shouldn't think they'd have told him that. By God, if they *have*—if it comes out about him, it would jolly well queer her pitch so far as the K.P. is concerned! But—of course, her people can prove whatever they like about *me*. Clegg was pretty queer about that night I forgot him outside Dru's flat, and Dru's reputation is pretty thick, too—'

His mind thus tangled in the web that catches people who do not know how to think, he made his way up the dark, narrow, dirty staircase that led to his solicitor's office.

"Bentley, Cross & Magwood" was painted on the shabby old door, but Francis Bentley and Lyman Cross had been mouldering in their graves since before Beville had left school.

Opening the door he came into a small and dusty ante-room where sat a smartly-dressed youth poring over a cross-word puzzle, and who told him that Mr. Magwood was out.

"But I have an appointment for 3.30," protested Beville, not without a touch of pomposity. Mr. Miles was sorry. "It's only twenty past, Sir," the young man added. "Mr. Magwood is over at the Law Courts, but he's sure to be back soon—will you go in and sit down?"

Mr. Magwood's office was probably no drearier than nine out of ten of the older-fashioned London solicitor's offices, but on that dark, miserable day it seemed to the waiting client a most horrible place.

'And to think that on that very table I signed Gracie's marriage-settlement!' he thought, miserably. 'Heavens, how happy I was! She's hard on me, Gracie is. I've not

been perfect, and I know it, but by God, she's being pretty hard on me!

The hideous clock ticked slowly on, rain poured like ink-spots down the dirty windows, and Charles Beville suddenly shivered.

'I can't wait all day for that old devil,' he decided. 'It's twenty to four now. He's no right to keep me waiting!'

And then the inner door opened, and in came Miss Mabel Waterson.

"Oh, Sir *Charles*," Miss Waterson cried, blushing a deep brown in her confusion, "I'd no *idea* you were here! Mr. Magwood has gone to the Law Courts—and it's so cold in here——"

Poor Miss Waterson, to be caught like that, in her very *oldest* office frock, and her celluloid cuffs. Her hair, too, needed a wash, and it was hours since she had even thought of powdering her nose.

'Luckily,' she thought, 'it's raining, and so *dark*——'

"There's a little fire," she stammered, "in my 'den'—it's so tiny I always call it my den—and I'm just having my tea. If you'd not mind its all being so very simple—not at all what you're *used* to, of course——"

Beville beamed. "I should *love* a cup of tea," he declared with one of those sudden bursts of sincere, if temporary, feeling that had helped to prevent his becoming a liar; "and I *do* feel a bit chilly here——"

The den was a den. A dingy room of eight by ten feet, virgin of paint for forty years, lighted by a filthy window overlooking a well-like court, and furnished with a battered, ink-splashed desk, and two wooden-seated chairs. But there was a spark of fire in the tiniest of basket grates; on the hob sat a well-furred iron kettle, and on the table stood a tea-tray, furnished, no doubt, by Woolworth's, but gay and pretty all the same.

"I do hope you can drink just plain India?" Miss Waterson inquired, hiding her celluloid cuffs in a drawer. I know China is the fashion, but——"

"I'm very fond of Indian tea, thanks. And what a jolly little teapot! This *is* comfortable. D'you mind if I smoke?"

He drank two cups of black tea, and ate two large, soapy slabs of plum-cake, and he felt comforted.

It was good, after his incredible and abominable morning, to be with someone who did not regard him as the scum of the earth. Miss Waterson was a very plain woman, her hair was hideous, her nose wanted powdering, there was something wrong with her figure, and besides these things he now perceived that her top teeth moved up and down when she talked. False teeth. Horrible. Yet—he was at his ease there in her "den", and a pleasant warmth of appreciation and sympathy seemed to radiate from her for his comfort.

"I hope Lady Grace is well?" she ventured, as she cut his second slab of the soapy cake, "and Mrs. Quintana? And the dear little baby?"

"They're all well," he answered in sudden gloom. And then, in one of his odd and uncontrollable impulses, he added, quickly: "You'll know before long, anyhow, so I might as well tell you, Miss Waterson— My wife is divorcing me."

"*Divorcing* you? Oh, Sir Charles, how terrible!" Her voice was shrill with horror, and she added quickly: "But whatever for?"

"Adultery," said Charles Beville grimly.

Tears of embarrassment rushed to Miss Waterson's eyes, and her big-pored cheeks grew a greyish-pale. Never in her life had anyone, and much less a gentleman, uttered that terrible word to her. "Oh," she gasped, and for one moment she buried that greyish face in her bony, red-knuckled hands.

Beville stared at her, slow to understand, and when he

did his distress nearly equalled hers. "I say," he stammered, "I shouldn't have said that to you. I *beg* your pardon, Miss Waterson! The truth is I'm upset—I've been horribly upset all day, and I—I—forgot myself. Do please forgive me——"

She uncovered her face and nodded. "Of course I forgive you. Only there's nothing to forgive. I—I'm a stupid girl, reely——"

And then she went on courageously: "And whatever you have done, Sir Charles, I'm sure you weren't to blame. Not much, anyhow. Gentlemen *do* have temptations that we ladies don't know anything about, and of course—Lady Grace is so *very* nice, and so kind to me that night, only—she seems so much older than you, and I'm sure if—I'm sure a grand passion excuses anything."

Then she poured out more tea.

'Oh, hell,' thought Beville. 'A grand passion!' Poor old thing, what an idiot I was to tell her. And I *can't* tell her the truth, or she'd *die*. Oh, damn!'

"I am very much honoured, Sir Charles," she went on, mopping up the tea she had poured on the tray, "by your—confiding in me. It is reelly a very great compliment. And I'm so sorry for you, if you don't mind my saying so——"

"I'm afraid it's my wife who deserves your pity. I've behaved very badly, as a matter of fact. *Very* badly indeed."

('How noble of him to admit it. And Lady Grace so much too old for him, and so very plain— Oh, I wonder who the lady is! I hope,' thought poor Miss Waterson in a burst of passionate sympathy, 'that she's good enough for him; I hope she's beautiful, too, and—and *young*——')

"I'm not very clever," she said, quietly, "but I've seen quite a lot of people in one way and another, and I can't—I *don't* believe you behaved badly, Sir Charles. And—I do hope that when it's all over—the divorce, I mean—you and the lady you love will be very happy."

(‘Now how on earth could a fellow tell her that there isn’t a lady at all? That there are at least a dozen ladies? By God, I *am* the world’s champion idiot!’)

“I shall never marry again, Miss Waterson,” he said, gravely, rising and holding out his hand. “I can’t explain. it to you, but I shall never marry. And now I fear I must go. I hear Mr. Magwood talking to Miles— Good-bye, and thank you a thousand times for the tea—and for your sympathy——”

“Oh, not at all, Sir Charles, not at all. *Good-bye——*”

She smiled, her teeth jumping up and down as she did so, but when the door had closed, she sat by her little fire, quietly crying.

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Thomas Magwood was another disappointment, if not precisely a disillusion, to Sir Charles Beville.

After all, Magwood had known his grandfather, and surely a man who has known a fellow’s grandfather might be a little more understanding—more sympathetic.

But it seemed that though Mr. Magwood considered that he perfectly understood Sir Arnold Beville’s grandson, he did not choose even to pretend to sympathize with him.

“I am sorry, Sir Charles,” the old solicitor said, his eyes fixed on the paper-knife he was balancing on his right forefinger, “that you are—er—distressed by Lady Grace’s decision, but I confess that I am unable to see why you are *surprised* by it——”

“Well, I should think *anyone* could see that! Yesterday morning I had no more idea than the man in the moon that she meant to divorce me, and this morning I find that she not only intends to do it, but that the thing is practically *started*.”

“Ah, yes, that I *do* understand; that you were so to

say taken aback by the suddenness—to you—of the matter. But I am sure that if you will reflect, you will have to admit that Lady Grace's *reasons* for taking this step, are—*er*—extremely justified. One moment, please, Sir Charles! It furthermore appears to me that Lady Grace, in waiting so long as she has done, has showed a most admirable patience and—*er*—long-suffering."

"Of course she has. My wife has always been a very wonderful woman, Mr. Magwood. I need no one to teach me that——"

"Then I take it that you will, in return for her generosity, make things as easy for her as you can?"

Charles Beville hated that fat old man with the fine, domed head, as he sat waiting for his reply. He had always liked Magwood, and he'd thought that Magwood liked him, and here he was, completely on Gracie's side.

By God, *everybody* seemed to be on Gracie's side! And yet he, too, had one. Gracie had not played fair, whatever they all said. She ought to have told him she knew about those silly affairs of his! If she'd told him he'd have stopped.

"Is my assumption correct, Sir Charles? I am right in assuming that you intend making the divorce easy for Lady Grace?"

And Beville knew that the old man was right; that there was for him no choice; that as a gentleman he could do no less than make things easy for his wife.

He rose. "Yes," he said, curtly, "I will do whatever is necessary. You may tell Mr. Rivers so. I take it that is what you want?"

"It is. And now, if I may, I will tell you that while I consider Lady Grace entirely within her rights in divorcing you, I regret extremely that things have come to this pass. It is most unfortunate. I well remember your sitting in that very chair and signing the marriage settlements. You were very happy that day——"

"I was."

"And when Violet was born and you re-made your will——"

"Oh, *don't*! I've had such a horrible day, Magwood, and I'm all in. I'll come again in a day or two, to learn exactly what must be done, but I really must go now. I suppose I'd better make a new will?"

"That is for you to decide," said the old man. "There is also the matter of alimony to be considered——"

He bowed and Beville left him and stumbled down the dark stairs to the narrow street. It was pouring, and walking back to Fleet Street the tired man took a taxi and went to his club.

It was well after nine, just as he was thinking of going home, that he was called to the club telephone.

"Hallo?" he asked, vaguely and unjustifiably hoping that it might be his wife who had rung him up. "Hallo? Charles Beville speaking——"

There was a pause. Then came a little gasp, and Violet's voice, faint and agitated, came to him across the wires.

"Daddy—Father—it's Violet——"

"Yes, my darling?"

"I— Oh, father," went on the voice, "I want to ask a favour of you——"

"Yes, my dear?"

There was a long pause, during which he heard his own heart beating hard.

"Father," Violet went on, "Mother has told me of your talk with her and Vincent, and—Oh, darling, I'm so sorry—so *terribly* sorry— But Bob thinks, and so does Mother, that it would be better if—if you didn't come home to-night. Would you very much mind——"

"Oh! Bob and Vincent think I'd better not come back to my own home to-night, do they?" An immense bitter-

ness seemed to flood his being as he stood there in the narrow pen. "And you are ready to—to take their advice? Violet, what in God's name—" he burst out in an uncontrollable half-sob, "do *you* think?"

Very gently she answered: "I think— Oh, Father—I think that perhaps they are right. We are all going to Saucers at three to-morrow, and Mother is dreadfully tired, and if you come we'd all *talk*— You see, dear——"

"Oh yes, I see! I see," he answered, his eyes hot with indignant tears, "that you are on their side. Right you are," he added with a rough laugh, "I'll sleep here. Tell Coney to bring my things, will you?"

He could not hear her crying, but for the moment he had no pity for her. She—his dear—his Violet—had gone against him. She was on her mother's side; on that swine Vincent's; she, who had loved him, she whom he had adored as he had adored no one on God's earth, had deserted him.

For a moment he stood there his knees bent, his jaw hanging, his face white and stricken, a lost, a deserted, a broken man.

There was, he felt without formulating the thought, no Heaven; no God.

And as truly as ever a man wanted to die and be done with the whole beastly business of this hateful world, Charles Beville wanted it. There was no ground under his feet, no Heaven over his head; there were no stars above him; no God to be merciful to him. Then, after what seemed hours, Violet's voice went on: "You know I'm not on their side, dear, but I *do* think it wiser for you to sleep at the club. Mother is really half ill, and I—they think I'm too tired—and in a few days, when I come up to see Sir Lindsay, we'll have lunch together, you and I—we'll have a good long talk, darling. So don't be 'waxy' with me——"

An unusual, almost an unique sensation of dignity came at that moment to Charles Beville.

"I see, my dear," he said, quietly, "and I'm not 'waxy'. I quite understand. Tell your mother that I agree, will you? And—when you—or she—want to see me, I shall be here at the club. You will give me a ring, won't you?"

"Oh, yes, Father dear! And—Mother will be going to stay with Uncle Cyprian in a fortnight—he has invited her; and—while she's there—" there was a break in the delicate voice, "I—Bob and I—want you to come to Saucers and stay with us. Will you come?"

Beville cleared his throat. 'I am to come while Grace—and Vincent—are staying with the duke!—I'll be damned and double-damned if I go,' he thought, a wave of anger surging from his thighs to his neck. Then he answered very gently:

"Yes, dear, I will come. Thanks very much, and thank Bob, will you? How," he added, "is Miss Mary Ann?" He heard his daughter's little gasp of relief. "Oh, *darling*," she cried, "how glad I am. How I shall love to see you. And Miss Mary Ann is—*too* lovely! Oh, Father—do try to be happy, won't you?"

The man's mind was such a miserable blur of different emotions that it seemed to him hours before he could answer his daughter's question. Hours, was it, or years? Then, pulling himself together, he grinned nervously into the telephone receiver, and cleared his throat.

"Don't you worry about *me*," he said, with a short laugh. "I'm as right as rain, my darling! And—tell your mother that she is perfectly right. Tell her that I've seen Magwood, and that we are going to do exactly what she wishes. You see, Violet," he added, "she has always been right, and I have always been wrong. So——"

Against his will his voice broke, and he stood staring stupidly at the wall, the receiver shaking in his hand at his ear.

"'And'—Father, dear?"

"That's all, my lamb," he whispered. "Don't you worry. Go to sleep, and sleep well. I—I love you, Violet——"

Unable to stand any more he crushed the receiver on to its hook, and stumbled out of the booth, sweat standing on his white face.

CHAPTER SIX

CHARLES BEVILLE never realized that it was he himself who allowed the news of his divorce to become public.

Theoretically he did not give things away, for he was a well-bred man, and knew the virtue of reserve, but in actual fact he could rarely keep a secret that in any way touched himself, for in every such question there were two sides: one for, and one against him; and his need of sympathy was like a constantly bubbling spring.

The day after his telephone talk with his daughter, he woke, after a restless night, to find James Coney, his valet, standing by him with a telegram. "The boy is waiting, Sir Charles," said the man, "so I thought I'd better wake you——"

Beville, who was a slow waker, grunted, rubbed his red-rimmed eyes, and held out his hand. Perhaps after all Gracie wanted to see him? Or Violet?

The servant watched him discreetly. Coney was fond of his master, as indeed were all his staff, except the resolute Isabella, but he knew a great deal about him—Beville was of the kind of man of whom, in this connection, one says "but" he knew, instead of "and" he knew—and he disapproved of a good deal of that knowledge, he himself being a naturally austere man.

'My word,' he thought, as Beville tore open the envelope, 'e looks awful! Poor old governor, for all his carryin's on 'e's a bit of an 'ome-bird, after all, like a lot of these 'igh-rollers—' Coney was no fool.

Beville threw down the telegram, keeping in his hand the reply-form, his face suddenly redder.

"Give me my pen, will you?" Then frowning, he added to himself: "What a bloody fool I am!"

The telegram he wrote out, and which Coney read as he took it down to the boy, was very short. "Of course not forgotten. Arriving at one-thirty—Charles."

The valet shrugged his shoulders as he noted the address! 'She's the worst of the bunch,' he commented silently to himself, 'unless I'm very much mistaken. Looks like one of them little African Spring-mice, too. All eyes and no face——'

Two hours later, after an aimless ramble along the Embankment, and a quicker turn through Battersea Park, Beville came back to Berkeley Square and made his way to Little Berkeley Place, formerly a mews, but now the abode of a group of painters, writers and actresses of various grades.

The readjusted houses, where not long before had dwelt the families of the coachmen of the aristocratic residents of the near-at-hand Square, were now gay with painted doors of all colours, and window-boxes of expensive flowers; it was a pleasant place, with its little Georgian houses, patterned brick pavement, and its comparative quiet.

Beville walked quickly to its far end, and rang at a big square door as yellow as a daffodil, and as shiny as melted butter.

He was not a man who believed that grief could be drowned by alcohol, but he had just had two sherries, the sun was shining, and after all yesterday was to him always yesterday, and the divorce was not yet. Even now he might possibly persuade Gracie to give him another trial—And in the meantime to-day was his.

"Good morning, Sir," said the smart parlour-maid, dressed in yellow like the door, and very pretty in her lace apron and cap.

"Morning, Beech. I'm not late, am I?"

"Oh, no, Sir Charles. Miss Battle is in the studio——"

The maid stood aside, and as was his habit, he went upstairs and into Drusilla Battle's drawing-room studio, unannounced.

Damn it, it *was* pleasant to be greeted as if one was liked, and Dru was as pretty as a peach, all in white, with her black pearls round her throat.

"You've treated me like a hound, you know," the girl began when she had sat down by him on the huge black chesterfield, "and I've had a rotten time. *Frightfully* ill I've been——"

She looked as if a breath of wind could blow her out of the wide, open window, and up into the pale, periwinkle-blue sky—where, from the conventionally religious point of view, she would have been a highly incongruous arrival.

She was a tiny creature with silver-gold hair cut like a bell, and hanging unwaved, and as smooth as metal, over her ears. Her pointed face, with its immense, tragic-looking, heavily made-up, borage-blue eyes, was extremely unusual, and the observant Coney had not been wrong in comparing it to that of the small African animal, although that small African animal has not the deep, heart-shaped mouth that was hers.

Her voice was low, and attractive with a cultivated and rarely forgotten huskiness, that was the delight of her thousands of women admirers. Her "fans"—for she was an actress, and in certain roles, that had to be fitted to her as closely as a shoe to an oddly-shaped foot, a very clever, oddly-moving actress.

"Oh, *darling*," she began, leaning her head against her guest's only partly hospitable shoulder. "You shouldn't have left me so long to myself! I've been drinking again, and on Thursday I nearly killed myself with cocaine——"

"Disgusting of you, Dru! Why do you do it?"

"I only do it when I am unhappy. You know that——" Her tone was exquisitely plaintive, and her slightly protuberant eyes, always as moist-looking as a llama's, filled with tears.

"Well, my dear," Beville retorted, moving slightly, and

lighting a cigarette, "you'll end by taking an overdose and dying, and then there'll have to be an inquest, and all sorts of horrors!"

"Don't, darling! You're trying to brace me up, but you can't do it. I'm only happy when you are kind to me, and you know it, yet you haven't been near me for a fortnight!"

"I've been busy, Dru, really I have. As a matter of fact, amongst other things I've—I've been becoming a grandfather——"

"I know. It was in all the papers. And a picture of Violet and her ugly devil of a husband, and his place in Sussex——"

"Suffolk."

"Suffolk, then. But——" suddenly she began to cry, sobbing like a child, and he squashed his cigarette into a bronze ash-tray, and mechanically though kindly took her in his arms.

"There, there," he murmured, reflecting that she was hardly bigger, hardly more solid, than Flannel Rag. "Don't cry, dear. Besides, you know quite well it's the dope that makes you unhappy—not me!"

"I know. I know! It's perfectly true, darling. But if you were good to me, I wouldn't *take* the dope, so it *is* your fault! I love you so terribly, Charles. I've never loved anyone in my life as I love you—and you don't love me a bit!"

Drawing away from him, her bell of hair perfectly unruffled, her eyes all pupil, and full of the largest tears he had ever seen in his life, she gazed at him, meretricious, full of vices, dangerous, yet unmistakably sincere in her suffering.

"You *don't* love me," she persisted.

"But of course I love you, darling," was his reply, and he meant it. He did love her in one of his ways, and at the moment, as he had many times before loved in one of his ways and at the moment. He had, indeed, probably

never in his life told a woman that he loved her unless he believed it.

"Now dry your lovely eyes, and give your hungry lover some food," he began presently, "I'm famished, my lovely, and—I do hope there are mushrooms for lunch?"

She laughed and dried her face on a small handkerchief. "Better still— Oh, Charles, I *am* so happy to see you again!—white truffles fresh from Turin by aeroplane, and I'll cook them in champagne in the chafing-dish!"

A common taste for uncommon food is a very real bond between a man and a woman, and unlike most Englishmen Charles Beville was a gourmet.

He always enjoyed a meal at Drusilla's, and he would have come oftener than he did but for the necessity he always felt of making love to her. Sometimes, when he was at his worst, he hugely enjoyed making love to her, but he was—for her unluckily—not always at his worst, and in certain of his better, more fastidious moods, the strange little creature was almost repulsive to him.

Knowing her to be what in his simple vocabulary he silently called a rotten little bitch, he was entirely without illusions regarding her, and little as he was given to self-analysis, he was ashamed of his connection with her. Ashamed, that is to say, as much as he was ashamed of anything that amused him.

And now, as he ate his delicious and exquisitely-served luncheon, he began to be glad he had come. Gracie had treated him badly, Violet had gone away without seeing him; Vincent was a false friend, and Bob Quintana had looked at him yesterday as if he were something noxious.

Yesterday was dead, of course, yet he still resented the suffering yesterday had given him, and as he ate, drinking rather more than usual—they had begun by two very potent, to him mysterious, cocktails—and listened to Miss Battle's now quiet, vague, amusing talk, a certain spirit of consolation crept into his being.

Dru was really very lovely. Not like anyone else in

the world. She was a little beast, of course, but, by Jove——

He couldn't remember afterwards what it was that he said that gave her the clue to his trouble, but suddenly she rose from the chaise-longue where she lay bathed in the pearly green light—like the light under young lime-trees—that filtered in through the silk-shaded window behind her, and stood pulling at her black pearls and gasping. "She's going to *divorce* you?" she cried, eagerly. "Are you sure? Oh, *Charles*," she cried, her face flooded with a lovely, faint rose-colour, "how—how glorious!"

He stared at her. "Don't be silly," he answered curtly; "I didn't mean to tell you, and it's not glorious at all. It's—horrible. But I don't want to discuss it, Drusilla, so we'll talk about something else if you don't mind——"

He had never before spoken to her in that voice; he had never before shown a decision against which she dared not protest.

"Very well," was her answer, "I won't tell anyone, and—we'll talk about whatever you like, but—you can't help my being glad, Charles. You know how I love you, and it's only *natural* that I should be glad. Now, darling, I won't say another word. Shall I play to you?"

Too clever to wait for a reply, she went to the lemon-wood piano and began to play. She was in her way a fine musician, for she used the pedal like a great master, and her rhythm was exquisite. Her mother had been an American—from Alabama—and the sense of syncopation innate in the southern states negroes was innate in her. Which, despite her natural fairness, might possibly have been no surprise to a close observer of her too deeply reddened and polished nails.

And now she played Spirituals, Blues, dozens of the melodious negro compositions written so often by Broadway German-Jews, and as that was the music he loved, Beville sat for over an hour as happy as a boy; enthralled.

He felt that kind of music in every fibre, and Drusilla

Battle (her real name was Beryl Clark) gave it to him in perfection, and in generous measure.

Like a lily she looked as she played, her lovely, flat back straight as a die as she swayed from her hips, and she did not talk. On and on she went, modulating from one key to another, with a subtlety that thrilled the big man in a way he could not have explained, playing some old favourites of his, sometimes singing a bar or two in her weak, sweet, husky voice, then going on to songs and dance-tunes he had never heard. Her memory was prodigious, and never for a second failed, and she was, as she played, happier than she had been for years. She called herself twenty-six, she sometimes looked twenty-four, she had been born in New Orleans, thirty-three years ago, and never since she had been grown-up, had she been as happy as she was that sunny April day.

For she loved Charles Beville, she perfectly realized the type and extent of her power over him, and now, she believed, could look forward to marrying him.

She knew that he had no wish to marry her, and that he would struggle hard to avoid doing so, but she believed, as she shot an occasional quiet glance at his big, rapt face, that between her charm and her music, and his weakness and old-fashioned sense of honour, she could make him do it.

'He's stupid,' she reflected, 'but once I got him to promise he'd stick to it——'

The too short, too pulpy crimson lips that often gave her an expression of sea-sickness, closed more tightly. 'I'll do it, by God,' she thought, 'I'll do it. But I'll have to knock off the drink and the dope, and I'll have to get rid of most of the crowd. He can't stick Lulu, and he hates Basil Freeth and Johnnie. He *would*, and they're so harmless, poor little swine— Besides, they can't help being that way. Pre-natal influence. Poor Basil's story of how he loved to dress up in his sisters' clothes when he was a kid. and walk up and down the avenue with his mother's pink

sun-shade! Oh Hell, what does it matter? Still, Charles won't stand for it, so they'll have to go, and that's that——'

Beville was delighted with the quiet way in which Miss Battle let him take leave of her that day, immediately after tea. As a rule she was hard to get away from, and tire-somely keen on arrangements for immediate future meetings, but that afternoon she said nothing about seeing him again, and the minute he suggested cutting along to the club, she rose and held out her hand.

"I've loved seeing you again, my dear," she said. "And if you are sorry about the divorce, well—so am I! I only want you to be happy, you know——"

"You're a dear, Dru," he returned, openly surprised and pleased. "I didn't want to be rude about—about discussing things, you know. It's just that well—a man *can't* very well talk about his wife with—with even a good pal like you——"

"*'Pal'*," she repeated, thoughtfully, a faint, very sweet smile on her lips. "Well, my dear, this pal quite understands. I've always been a jealous little devil, though, and I have suffered horribly sometimes about—about Her who Cannot be Discussed! You mustn't resent that. And once you are free I shan't be jealous any more. It won't make any real difference—just a feeling I've got. That's all I meant, dear! Good-bye, and thanks for coming——"

He kissed her, and rejoicing in her unexpected attitude, went his way downstairs and out into the soft sunshine.

He was undoubtedly less miserable than he had been yesterday, though nothing whatever had changed.

Gracie still meant to divorce him; she still meant to marry Vincent; Violet was still on her side, and had not let him come to say good-bye to her; Vincent obviously did not admire him, and had been false to him; Bob Quintana, he was beginning to think, actually disliked him, though he had always liked Bob, and tried to be kind to him; Nanny—the more he thought of his talk with her, the more

unsympathetic she seemed—and old Thomas Magwood had been about as comforting as a cold poultice.

‘Anyone would think,’ he mused, ‘that I’m a perfect brute!’ But that nice old Miss Waterson had understood. Yes, Miss Waterson had certainly seen things as they really were. A very nice woman. And with Dru—Dru, to see whom, all London flocked to wherever she might be acting; Dru who had, rumour said, been very greatly admired by England’s richest duke; Dru, with about every second man in the smart young artistic set after her, *pour le bon ou pour le mauvais motif*—Dru loved *him*. ‘By God, she *does* love me, too, poor little Dru!——’

He marched along Berkeley Street and down to St. James’ Street wondering whether, after all, Gracie might not come to see sense? Anything seemed possible on that lovely Spring afternoon.

‘One thing I *will* do,’ he decided, arriving at his club, and pausing for a moment before going in, ‘I just *won’t* see Magwood until I’ve been to Saucers. Violet is *sure* to let me know when Gracie goes to see Uncle Cyprian, and then I’ll hare down to Saucers at once. Nothing can be final till I see that old blighter, Magwood, and nobody can *force* me to see him till I want to—I’ll be damned if I’ll let them rush me——’

Relieved and almost hopeful, he went into the club and asked for his letters.

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Violet’s letter was, he at once perceived, less a letter than a document. It was in a large envelope, it was registered, it was written on big, thin, pearl-grey sheets, and of these big sheets covered with her small, individual writing, there were eight.

He stood staring at the letter with an odd feeling that it was somehow a very important, possibly portentous one; when had she written it? It must have taken her a long time, for she wrote slowly and thoughtfully, often dream-

ing over a phrase, or pondering the choice between two almost interchangeable words.

'She wrote it last night,' he decided. 'Last night when she should have been asleep—' He had a quick, sharp vision of her room, the firelight, freshly fed for the night, warm on the rosy walls, the chintz curtains at the open window stirring in the breeze, and in the bed the girl, banked up by pillows, wrapped in a white, woolly shawl she liked to have by her at night, her writing-case on her raised knees, her delicate little face brownish white against the snowiness of the bed-linen, writing, writing. And to him.

She would not see him because her mother and her husband advised—wanted—her not to, but secretly, in the night, she had given him her time, her slight strength, her thoughts. The little dear!

"Hello, Muffin," a voice broke into his short dream: "A letter from a lady, I perceive, and a long one. What an old scoundrel you are, and you a grand-dad!"

It was a man he loathed; a man said to be half a Jew of low extraction, but who had married the daughter of a greatly liked peer, and thus forced the unwilling portals of the club. 'London is full of these damned club-crashers, nowadays——'

"The letter is from a lady, yes," he returned shortly. "It's from my daughter, who went to the country this morning; Good evening."

There was in his voice and face such disproportionate wrath that the other man uttered some excuse and turned away, leaving him there in the empty hall, looking like a man with an unexpected love-letter in his hand. Where should he read it? Not here in the club; not even in his own room, for Coney would be in and out there, and he'd tell the other servants that Violet had written to him.

It would be right, somehow, to read what Violet had to say to him out of doors somewhere. In the park, or—

by the river? He liked the good old Thames, and so did she. English, the Thames was, the most English thing in England, perhaps— Yes, he'd go to good old Battersea Park and sit on one of those benches at the brink of the river, where he'd never yet met a soul he knew.

He'd be all alone there—with Violet.

He walked across St. James' Park, and along Grosvenor Road and the Chelsea Embankment to Chelsea Bridge, when, hugging the happiness of the letter to his heart, he stood for ten minutes watching the sunlit, gold-brown waters, and dreaming.

'Wicked little darling,' he chuckled to himself. 'Not a word to Gracie and Bob and Vincent. Just: "Oh, yes, if you *think* so—I'll ring him up and tell him," and then dinner—she'll have dined upstairs, but they'll have gone up and sat with her afterwards, to make her agree not to see me, the Coal-Black Sheep—and then, when they had all gone, and even Nurse, and Miss Mary Ann was asleep, and Nurse snoring away in the next room—I'm sure Nurse snores!—up she gets, the wicked little pet, and creeps about in her woolly slippers, and gets her paper, and her pen, and her little Florentine writing-case that Edith gave her for her birthday years ago, and—she writes her letter to me. Her sweet letter! Oh, dear me, God bless her!'

He found a bench close to the river and backed by a clump of already lavish and fragrant lilac bushes, and after sitting for a while again tasting the sweetness of Violet's lovely duplicity, he took the big envelope from his pocket, and read his letter.

"My darling, dearest Father," [it began], "It was very sad talking to you on the telephone to-night, and I hated asking you not to come home, but I really *was* terribly tired, and Phaily said I must rest, and I was so full of things to tell you that I knew I couldn't see you and *not* talk. Besides, I wanted to do whatever I could to make mother a little happier, and Bob agreed with her. So you see?

"When you come to Saucers—Mother is going to Ringborough Place the 16th—we shall have lots of talks, and I shall be seeing you in town, too, but Saucers is *Bob's*, so it won't be just you and me there, and I shan't feel so able to say everything I want to, to you. Then—once the divorce is started—if it really does start—things will be different. A kind of dividing line will be passed; like a star getting into another star's orbit, if they ever do? But you'll know how I mean, dear.

"Up to this, I'm still here in my own room, in *your* house, and I can say all I want to say to you, so here I am, propped up in bed, the firelight making the room all lovely and fairylike, Miss Mary Ann sleeping in the Lavender Room, Nurse Widgeon snoring—I can hear her—and I shall write you a very long and very careful letter. Be patient with it. I shall say *exactly* what I feel, so you mustn't mind the words, will you? You are always so good to me.

"Firstly, darling, you do know how I love you. I always loved you more than anyone in the world, even mother, and of course, Bob doesn't count, because that's all so different. It just couldn't possibly be compared, but it hasn't taken even one tiny shred of my love from you. Perhaps I even love you *more* now.

"When I was little I used to think that the Sleeping Beauty's Prince must have looked like you—and Cinderella's, too. Then when I read Shakespeare, you looked like *all* the nice ones, Benedick, and Romeo, and Hamlet, and Ferdinand, and so on. To me they were all great, big, fair men with curly hair and three-cornered eyes, and separated front teeth, and dimples. And they all stammered a very little, like you, when you are excited, or embarrassed.

"It was wonderful having such a father. Molly and Daphne used to boast to me about their brothers, but I never wanted a brother. I had *you*, you see.

"And then while I was still rather a worm after my

typhoid fever, came that day when I heard poor mother telling His Ex.

"I'd been asleep—it was one of those very warm August days—and when I waked up on the cane chair on his balcony, I couldn't quite gather my wits together. You know how *you* are when you first wake up. Woolly-headed.

"Mother was crying, and His Ex said: 'But my dear, Charles is devoted to you! You must forgive him this silly little adventure.' I didn't know that such things were called adventures, so I wondered why she was crying so dreadfully. And then she said: 'Father, Charles has *never* been faithful to me. He has had a hundred mistresses.' So then I knew. It was terrible, darling. Of course I knew exactly what she meant, I knew all about the Loring's divorce, and poor Lady Benchester's, and naturally, I'd read history. And poor Mother went on and on. His Ex tried to stop her, but he couldn't, and she named—well, a dozen or so of women—Mrs. Percival, Mrs. Orme Blakely, and a lot of others, some of whom I knew, and one or two I'd seen on the stage. His Ex was appalled. He asked her how she knew; how she could be sure, and she told him. Rachel Baring had told her about some—you know what a cat Rachel is—and Monica Babbacombe had 'given something away', too. Oh, she was sure, and His Ex had to admit it. I suppose he must have known before. She said: 'Papa, I've borne it for twenty years for Violet's sake, and now I can bear it no longer,' and then—I was trying to get past the window to the Tapestry Room—he said, poor old darling: 'My dear, you must go on bearing it, for Violet's sake, until she is married.'

"I wanted to scream out that she *mustn't* wait—I felt I'd rather die than be married—that I didn't care, that she must divorce him—*you*—at once, but I felt so queer I couldn't speak. I felt sick, Father, wasn't that odd?

"But she cried worse than ever, then—it was awful. It was so unlike quiet, dignified Mother. It was like seeing

a lovely meadow you'd known all your life suddenly swallowed up by an earthquake. His Ex kept saying: 'Grace, Grace, *please* don't cry so, my dear,' and then finally I managed to get to the Tapestry Room, and through it to the other door, to the little flight of stairs.

"I was so terribly afraid I was going to be sick on that wonderful Persian carpet in the Tapestry Room, but I wasn't! Only as I started down the steps I stumbled and fell—you know about that. But now comes something you *don't* know, dearest!

"When I first began to come to, things were very queer. It was just utter misery. I didn't remember what had happened, but I had never been unhappy before—Mother and you were always so wonderful to me, you see—and I didn't *know how* to be unhappy, so it was really horrible.

"I suppose everybody's first sorrow is like that; one doesn't know how to take it; only most people have had little hurts and shocks that prepared them, in a kind of way, and I had had none. Nothing but lovely things had ever happened to me. And then, Mother and you used to come and sit by me, and love me, and I knew that something was wrong, that something dreadful had happened, but I *couldn't remember what it was*! It was perfectly dreadful, Father. I used to lie and think, but my mind just wouldn't work. I can't tell you how awful it was.

"Well, of course I went on trying to remember, but I couldn't. Then poor Grandfather had his operation, and Mother was always with him, and you used to come and read to me, and you were so sweet, and yet everything was different. I felt as if I had a big stone in my stomach. That sounds silly, but it *was* like that. And then there were the awful headaches. You'll remember them, of course.

"And when His Ex died, and you told me about it, I understood, of course, but I didn't care. Not a bit, though

he'd always been so sweet to me! Nothing mattered except the horrible thing I couldn't remember. And Mother looked as if she was going to die too, while Grandfather was lying dead in the Blue Room. Poor darling, I suppose she felt she had lost all she had, for she hadn't really got *you*, and I was too young to count. Oh, I just can't tell you how desolate and unhappy I was.

"You worried so about me, and so did Vincent, and so did Phaily, and Nanny, and all I wanted was to remember, and I couldn't. I couldn't *ask*, you see, because I *did* know that no one knew that I knew whatever the awful thing was!

"And then I got physically stronger, and Phaily sent us to Malaga, and Mother was so sweet to me, and so very gentle. I suppose she must have promised His Ex to wait till I was married, and her poor face was so sad. And when you came out to fetch us, with the new Rolls for her, I knew she didn't *want* the Rolls, and you were so disappointed—I nearly caught it, then, the memory that always seemed floating in the air just beyond my reach. I so nearly got it that I was very rude to you one day at Seville. I hated you for a moment. I wonder if you remember? Poor Father, you looked so bewildered; and I was so ashamed.

"And always you and Mother—chiefly you, though—were wondering what was the matter with Violet!

"I once overheard you say something to her about it, and then you took me to that specialist in Weymouth Street—but always, always, I could feel you wondering.

"Well, darling, it was nearly Christmas before I remembered, and it happened in such a strange way. Vincent had given me a book of translations of Gaelic poetry, do you remember? Well, that book did it. It was that evening when mother and you were dining with the Lorings to meet Rachmaninoff, and I was having dinner alone.

"Mother had ordered such a good dinner for me—there

were sweetbreads with mushrooms, and I've never been able to eat them since!—and John was out, and Domenico was fussing about, trying to make me laugh, and then, as I ate my sweetbreads, I opened Vincent's book and began to read.

"There were Jacqueminot roses and white lilac in the Queen Anne bowl on the table, and as I write now I can nearly smell them! Domenico was standing behind your chair, looking so benign and sweet, and it was all quiet. What a heavenly room the dining-room is! Well, suddenly I came to this little verse:

" 'You have taken the East and you have taken the West
from me,
You have taken the path before me, and the path
behind me, from me.
You have taken the moon, and you have taken the
sun from me,
And great is my fear that you have taken God from
me.'

"And then I knew. I remembered. It all came back like a flash of lightning. The awful grief and shame.

"Domenico came trotting to me and made me drink some wine. I suppose I looked awful. Then I went upstairs. He wanted to send Nanny to me, but I didn't want her. I needed to be alone.

"Well, poor darling father, now you know. And it is very late, and I must try to go to sleep. Since I've been married, of course, I understand better, but I cannot see how you *could* treat mother so. It seems to me that those very secret things can't be just different. They must be either utterly beautiful or utterly vile. Am I wrong? After all, I know very little, of course.

"The queer part is that while mother says—quite quietly and without rancour—'it is just that he never loved me', I seem to know that she's wrong, that you *do* love her.

You might have loved *one* of those women—or perhaps even two, I don't know—but you can't have loved them all, so it *was* simply horridness. And because I love you so much, it breaks my heart to know that of you. I can't *bear* to think of you and Drusilla Battle. And that hateful Mrs. Paull. How can you *like* them, even? No one could *like* the Battle girl, I'm sure, and I'm sure you can't love her. So it really must be just horridness. (That looks like a tear, but it isn't. I just took a drink of water and spilt some.)

"And now here is why I have written all of this, some of which I'm sure His Ex. would call 'most unseemly'.

"Mother is determined to divorce you, and—not, I think, exactly determined, but certainly *willing*—to marry Vincent. And Vincent is a darling, and he adores her, and I'm sure he would do everything on earth to make her happy, and of course she has been frightfully lonely for years. Bob is all for the divorce, and Uncle Cyprian is, too. (I don't think Uncle Cyprian is exactly just to you, but he adores mother, you see.) Well, I'm *not* for the divorce. I do think you have been horrible, father, cruel and bad to mother, and awful to yourself, too, but I don't want the divorce. I want you and mother to make up and begin over. I think she's wrong when she says you have never loved her. I think you do love her in your own way. I don't say your way is a very good one, I'd hate it myself, for I want every bit of Bob, but I believe you care more for mother than for anyone but me, and I *am* you, so I hardly count.

"I haven't told anyone a word of this, and I shan't. It isn't Bob's business, it's yours and mother's, and mine, and as she won't help, I want to try to.

"Father, if you and I could persuade her to try again—if you really *do* feel sorry and ashamed, as I believe you do, and could make her believe it—would you play fair? Would you behave yourself? *Could* you?

"Bob says some old men can't help themselves; that

having lived that kind of life for so long makes them unable to live any other, but I'm sure you're not like that.

"And much as I love mother, I can see now that she has been hard with you. She is so terribly proud. I believe that though she has been good, and you bad, some of your badness may be the reaction to a certain *bad* goodness in her. Do you see what I mean?

"Anyhow, let's try. I'll let you know the minute she's gone to Uncle Cyprian's, and then you come here at once, and we will try to plan. Shall us, Daddy?

"Good night, darling. I am very tired, so excuse all the faults—in language, in judgment, and in taste. I love you.

"VIOLET."

Beville read this letter through twice, and then, putting it into his pocket, he walked slowly back to his club. What his daughter had written made him happier and more hopeful, but she had called him an old man, and for the first time he realized that his youth was really gone.

CHAPTER SEVEN

AFTER all, Beville reflected, as he ate his dinner that night in his own dining-room, the house was his. His great-grandfather had bought it to be near old Sam Rogers, and ever since it had been lived in by Bevilles. It had never been let, for the tribe was one that loved and respected its own vine-and-fig-tree, and the modern habit of letting strangers sleep in one's beds, sit in one's chairs, and enjoy one's pictures, tapestries, and rugs, and books, was to them a thing abhorrent and even vulgar.

What a fine, nobly proportioned room the dining-room was, he reflected; few finer ones in the whole of London. And how contentedly and proprietarily the portraits hung on the deep blue walls. They would, mused their present owner—who vaguely felt that it was they who owned him—not only be out of place elsewhere, but they'd know it; and he wondered how they would like presiding at the meals of some newly-rich, fat Jew?

Beville was one of those people who always envisaged unknown Jews as fat and slightly oily.

And there was Harry Benchester letting his Grosvenor Square house to a queer, common, pushing grass-widow from Tchicago; horrible woman with scars under her hair, where her face had been lifted. Old Lord Benchester, the one that'd been Prime Minister, would turn in his grave if he knew. And Derek and Monica Babbacombe let their house regularly every year for two months. . . .

Well, *his* house would never be let, and by God, if Gracie *should* prove obdurate, and divorce him despite Violet's efforts, he wouldn't let her have the house after all, for that would mean its becoming Vincent Lundy's home! A quick vision of Lundy's frail, insignificant figure sitting in the chair he himself was at the moment so

adequately filling, sent a rush of dark red to his neck and face. By God, no. If, despite Violet's prayers and his own apologies and resolution to be better in the future, Gracie *should* insist on the divorce, he would be very generous; he would give her all the money she wanted, and a great deal more, for he knew that though she had inherited very little from her father, she would not ask much from him—but Vincent should not live in his house, and eat his meals under the high and handsome noses of all those old Bevilles and their well-born wives.

"I'm not going down to Saucers till the 17th," Domenico," he said presently, as with great relish he ate his lamb and green peas. "Miss Violet wrote to me last night, and she wants me to come when she's *alone*. Her ladyship is going to stay with his Grace the 16th, so I shall go the 17th—Miss Violet must only have one person there at a time——"

"Indeed, Sir Charles?" answered Salieri. "It will be a nice change for you, and *la Signorina*—*Signora* Quintana—will be very happy showing you her home——"

"*One* of her homes," Beville corrected him. "This house, too, will be her home so long as she lives——"

"*Già*," assented the old man, bowing with ceremony.

It occurred to Beville that he should not have told him about the letter; that through Isabella—Isabella, who did not like her master—it might easily get back to Gracie, and thus cause trouble for Violet.

Cursing himself mildly, he tried to set his mistake right.

"Don't mention Miss Violet's letter to anyone, please," he said, not without a certain pleasure in letting his old servant and friend know that Violet's letter had been a secret one, "it was about private business——"

"I will say nothing, sir——"

And Beville nodded, satisfied.

How very comfortable he was there in his beautiful dining-room, at his beautifully-set table. How fine the heavy, plain old silver was, and the delicate napery. . . .

No, no, Gracie *couldn't* hold out against Violet's pleading and his own remorse and good intentions.

He had behaved badly, very badly, but during their talk at the studio he had acknowledged it generously, and promised to be good henceforth, and not one word more would he ever say about her not having told him that she knew—though she had been very wrong indeed in thus deceiving him. No doubt about that.

He had been in love with Gracie when he married—by Jove, hadn't he just been in love with her! His mind, as he went on with his dinner, became a kind of cinema screen, on which his curiously faithful memory projected a series of clean-cut, cameo-like pictures. . . . Gracie, as he had first seen her, riding with some other English girls on the Roman Campagna: he could nearly see her then as he ate his fish, her clear face with its eyes pale against the sunburn, and her ash-blond hair clubbed and tied with a flat black bow under her hat.

Eighteen, Gracie had been then. Too pale, of course, but he had loved the pallor under the delicate brown given it by the Roman sun, and how well she had sat her splendid little mare, Fiammetta.

'There! I even remember her mare's name, by God! after all these years, and the bit of mimosa in her button-hole. . . . I'll bet not many fellows can remember little things like that. . . .'

"I have a remarkable memory, Domenico," he said, with his irrepressible longing for sympathy—which to him and his kind means admiration—"I've been thinking about that spring in Rome, when I first came to the Embassy——"

"That was a fine spring, indeed, sir—a real Roman spring! I remember the lilies of the valley in the Embassy gardens, and how very fond of them her ladyship was——"

Beville nodded. "She was, indeed—always had a fancy for lilies of the valley. I used to think," he added with a half-shy grin that made him look very young to the so much older man, "that she was like one herself."

"*E vero, è vero, Signore.* So she was. *Una bellissima Signorina*—those were the good days," went on the old man, "even the sun seemed brighter then to me, but Isabella says I am an old fool for thinking that!"

Beville nodded. He was enjoying his dinner, and he was deeply interested in the faithfulness of his memory; interested and proud. He was sure that Gracie couldn't tell him what *he* had worn that first time they met! . . .

'And,' his rambling thoughts went on, 'I'll bet sixpence she's forgotten all about that picnic when I killed the snake! And the day His Ex let me take her to Rocca di Papa. That's a grand view, of course, but I can't remember it. I was looking at *her*. . . . And she probably remembers the view and forgets even that I was there——'

It gave him an odd bitter consolation thus mentally to accuse Lady Grace of a faithless memory; seemed to even things up a bit. 'If she'd really loved me'—he was now eating an extremely fine bit of roquefort with his salad, and he was enjoying it—'she'd have been broken-hearted when she found out about Alice Anthony—or *was* Alice the first one? Broken-hearted she'd have been, and was she?—not she. She didn't even mention it to me! Preposterous, I call such indifference—*preposterous*——'

A glass of 1870 port added to the indignation that was doing him so much good, and he began to feel himself an unusually ill-used man, and the wise old Italian, unobtrusively studying his face, wondered what his thoughts could be.

'He looks happier now—*poveretto*——' mused the old man; 'after all, he's nothing but a great boy. All Englishmen—these big red ones—are nothing but boys, but the new generation, the small ones who are too artistic without being artists—*they* have the souls of old ladies. *Si, si—delle donne vecchie*——'

Thus these two friends silently mused, happy in each other's all but wordless company.

When the door-bell rang and John went to the door,

Charles Beville was eating his favourite spring sweet—junket with strawberries and cream—and thoroughly enjoying himself.

‘A telegram, probably,’ he thought, ‘but I shan’t go out to-night for anybody! I’ll try to get on with that book of Conrad’s that Gracie likes so much, though it’s devilish complicated and long-winded——’

Then the door opened and John announced Vincent Lundy.

Lundy was in evening dress, and over it he wore a queer black coat that he had had for years; a coat with a cape to it. A ridiculous coat Beville had always thought, but now he had no time to notice it.

“I must see you for a moment, Beville,” Lundy said quietly, without shaking hands with him. “No, I’ll not have any wine, thanks——”

He was very pale—that ugly, yellow pallor of dark Southern men—and he looked extremely grave.

“Nothing about Violet—?” Beville’s voice was urgent and harsh.

“No, no. Violet’s all right——”

Beville rose. “Coffee in the library, please, Domenico,” he said. “Come along, Vincent——”

The two men crossed the hall and went into the room that was to Lundy almost as familiar as it was to his host; almost as much his own *foyer*.

“Thanks, but I won’t sit down,” Lundy replied absently to his host’s invitation. “I am going to a concert, but I had to come to see you first——” He spoke with extreme punctiliousness, and then, after a pause, cleared his throat, and went on, his voice deeper than ever.

“Beville,” he said abruptly, “Violet has been trying to persuade Gracie to give up the divorce and take you back.”

“Has she, indeed?” Beville smiled, and looked down at the little man in the way against which his wife had so bitterly protested. “And how do you know, may I ask?”

“I know because I was there. I took the portrait down

this morning, so that Violet should find it hung in its place on her arrival——”

“An excellent excuse!”

“Not an excuse at all. Why should I need an excuse to go to Violet’s house? But the point is that before I left, Gracie told me that Violet asked her this morning to—to stop the divorce proceedings. Violet was very much excited about it, and very persistent. It was pretty painful for Gracie——”

“Of course, Violet hates the idea of the divorce but——” Beville paused. Why had Violet not awaited her mother’s departure, as she had written him she would, and talked it all over with him before putting her plea to her mother? “Violet and I,” he went on, “were going to have a long talk as soon as—as soon as she was a little stronger, but I didn’t know she meant to try *now* to persuade—my wife—to give up her insane idea. I wish she had waited—I didn’t know——”

Lundy frowned, his deep-set eyes glowing sombrely. “What you didn’t know doesn’t matter,” he declared, his deep voice harsh. “What does matter is that Gracie asked me to see you and explain that nothing—*nothing, remarquez-le bien!*—not even Violet’s wishes, can persuade her to stop the divorce. Her mind is absolutely made up.”

There was a pause, during which Beville felt his throat swelling with rage. That Gracie should send a message to him by her—her—the man she wanted to marry!

“I don’t believe you,” he said untruthfully, his one wish being to strike back, to hurt by a sneer the man whose physical inferiority protected him from the blow a stronger, bigger man could at that crisis not have escaped.

To his surprise, Lundy’s wide, thin lips, so pale between his black moustache and his brindled, scraggy beard, stretched in what was undoubtedly a smile of satisfaction. “I *told* her you’d say that,” Lundy cried, with a short bark of laughter. “It isn’t true that you don’t believe it! You *do* believe it—but of course you’d say you don’t——”

And throwing back his silk-lined cape, he unbuttoned his coat and from an inner pocket took an envelope. "I made her write it down," he added.

Beville's hands shook as he tore open the envelope, and under his rival's sardonic and proud gaze, he read it.

It was very short: "Dear Charles," Gracie had written in her beautifully clear hand, "Violet has been begging me to stop the divorce and give you another chance. This is only to say that if she should tell you her wish, and you should share it, there is no use in wasting time seeing or writing to me about it. I have made up my mind, and though I am sincerely sorry to hurt Violet—and even you—nothing can make me change it.

"Even if Vincent did not exist, I should, now that Violet is married and has a life of her own, divorce you. I made up my mind to this over a year ago. But he does exist, and as I value and appreciate his affection for me, I shall marry him as soon as possible. So please do not attempt to make me give up my decision. One more thing. None of your 'friends' shall be mentioned as co-respondents. Mr. Magwood will arrange all that. I think you should see him at once. Good-bye, Charles, and I hope you may be happy. GRACE BEVILLE."

He read the letter slowly and then put it into the fire.

"Thanks for your kindness in being my wife's messenger," he said dryly.

And then suddenly, drawing back in a sharp movement, his hands clenched, his face disfigured by a rush of blind hatred, he shouted: "For God's sake, get out, you little swine, before I hurt you!"

Lundy did not budge. He was no coward, and Charles Beville and he had been friends for twenty-five years. He knew his man.

"Good-bye," he answered quietly. "You can see for yourself that it is not my doing. I'd never have raised a finger to get her to divorce you, Charles. I've been

absolutely loyal to you, and perhaps you'll realize it before long——"

Taking up the bell-crowned top-hat that he had worn for years, he went to the door, and then he turned. "Good-bye, Charles," he added quietly.

"Good-bye," was Beville's curt reply, and not stirring, but glancing into a small Queen Anne mirror that hung before him, he saw that as Lundy turned to the door, his hollow eyes were full of tears.

.

So that was that. Violet's loving plan was a failure, and Gracie really was going to do the incredible, abominable thing. And Vincent, after all, had turned out to be dearer to her than he, Charles, was. All very well to say that she'd have divorced him even if Vincent had not existed; Vincent *had* existed, and no doubt his years of self-control and silence had made an immense impression on Gracie. Women did admire that heroic bunk, though for his part he had found that most of them liked to be carried away; "swept off their feet", as they called it. He grinned cynically. But how amazing Gracie was! Of all the women in the world she was the last he would ever have suspected of being willing to face the nasty publicity of the divorce court. She had always been so damned fastidious! He'd always thought Edith Manisty and Gracie were the most dignified women he knew, yet here was Gracie doing this horrible thing. "I wonder what Edith will think of it?" he thought, still standing by the fire, Mrs. Tanq at his feet. "By God, I *do* wonder! She's so like Gracie—but for the one time; Gracie wouldn't *ever* have lost her head—I should like to know what Edith *will* think about it—" And after a minute he rang up Lady Manisty. Yes, Lady Manisty was at home, and she was alone. "I'd love to see you, Charles," her quiet voice went on, "for Eva Carstairs has just told me something—something

about Gracie and you—that I can't believe until you—or she—tell me it's true——”

Beville laughed. “I'll come on at once, my dear,” he said, “and I'll tell you all about it— Good-bye——”

He turned away from the telephone, and was about to take up his hat when something—something that was perhaps more than an instinct, but that was certainly less than a thought—gave him pause. He stood quite still for a moment staring at nothing and then, gently putting aside Mrs. Tanq, who had followed him from the library, he went upstairs with his odd, light tread, and into the big grey-and-white room that had once been his as well as his wife's, but that now for several years had been hers alone.

It was a large room with fine old furniture beautifully spaced, and two great windows. There was Gracie's dressing-table by which he had so often sat, watching her make her simple toilet, and now, drawn to it by some feeling that he did not even try to analyse, he sat down before it and gazed moodily into the big oval glass.

There is poetry and there is tragedy in every woman's toilet glass, and this the indignant and hurt man vaguely felt.

‘She liked that glass from the first,’ he thought. ‘And how pretty she used to look in it, with her lovely hair down . . . What men miss nowadays when their brides haven't any hair to take down! My God, I can remember how my heart beat that night at Ravello, while I was pulling out the hairpins—and she used to let me brush it, too, sometimes; lovely when it gets tangled in a fellow's fingers——’

Opening one of the crystal bottles that stood before him he sniffed at it sadly. ‘Orris root. So she's still got powdered orris-root from that Florentine herbalist. . . .’

After a few moments he rose and wandered aimlessly about the room. ‘It had,’ he thought, ‘been prettier when it was blue, but Gracie liked the grey and silver. . . . Violet used to come in in the morning when she was a

Tiny, and he would make high knees for her to sit on and fall from. How she used to laugh. . . . How long ago was it that Gracie had that illness that—as he had believed—had banished him from the big blue bed? *Years.*

‘Well, dammit, I’m not a monk. Never pretended to be a monk. Never wanted to be a monk. If she cared enough to talk it over with me—to talk it *out*, too——’

It was to him utterly inconceivable that anyone should not wish to talk things over and out.

‘But, no, she never said a word; not one word did she say. So how in hell could I know that she knew? And, after all, I never did anything so very bad. Never went after young girls, for instance, as so many fellows do; or even really *pursued* a married woman—not really pursued. If a woman didn’t show me she wanted me I never bothered very much about her.’

And this seemed to him a thing wholly admirable.

Yet, as he stood by that bed, where he had slept with his young wife, and where his daughter had been born, a feeling of utter desolation again crept over the man’s spirit. ‘She used to look so sweet asleep, somehow,’ he thought, ‘with her long pigtail. Always had her mouth a tiny bit open, too, like a little mouse—*H’m!* I did try to be sweet to her when His Ex died, too,’ he pondered ruefully, ‘and she wouldn’t let me——’

He stood for some time by the bed, and then he bent down and laid his hot cheek for a moment to her pillow, and his eyes were full of tears.

‘*There*, now I’ve played the sentimental fool, and I’ll not do it again. I’ll be damned if I do! She doesn’t want me, and I’m not going to worry about her. She’s beautiful and she’s an angel, but she’s not being fair to me now. I dare say I shall get over feeling like this before long, for she’s beginning to look pretty old—years older than Edith——’ He started and glanced hastily at his watch. ‘By Jove,’ he thought, turning to the door. ‘Edith will be waiting for me——’

Ten minutes later he had reached the big building of flats in Park Lane whither Edith Manisty had moved a year or two before from her too small house round the corner, and the newest thing in lifts shot him up to the top floor.

His hostess was sitting between a wood-fire and an open window overlooking the park, and before he entered the room she had taken off her horn-rimmed reading-glasses and risen.

"Charles," was her quiet greeting, "*I am* so glad to see you!"

"So am I, my dear, so am I," he returned, incoherent in his embarrassment. "I—I've been frightfully busy. *You* know—the baby and—er—so on——"

"Of course. Sit down in your own chair. I'm delighted that Violet is doing so well—Gracie seemed a little worried the last time I saw her—just before I went to Kent, it was, at Mrs. Penroses's. Is it too late for coffee?"

"Yes, yes, thanks. I mean no, it *isn't*! I'd love some. I didn't get my coffee to-night," he added, with an aggrieved air. "I was interrupted."

Edith Manisty was not a brilliant woman, or even, as was Mrs. Quincy Paull, a very entertaining one, but she had a way of making people very comfortable, mentally as well as bodily, and now she asked no questions, but, when she had ordered coffee, sat chatting about indifferent things until the butler had again been and gone.

"Three lumps? Baby! You see," she laughed, "I haven't forgotten——"

And when he had drunk two cups of coffee—not so good, he reflected, as Quincy's, or even Drusilla Battle's—he burst out and told her his story as he at that moment saw it.

She listened almost without comment; an excellent listener.

She was a tall woman, less perfectly built than Mrs. Paull, and without Lady Grace's peculiar, awkward gracefulness, but she carried herself with a beautiful dignity, and

was always dressed to perfection, in the quiet way of the greatest Paris dressmakers.

Under—but not much under—forty-five, she looked, in a favourable light, much younger, possibly because her careful make-up was inconspicuous and becoming, as it so rarely is in the graceless and exasperating middle years. Her chestnut hair—King Edward had admired it—had been touched up by an artist, and had none of the bracken-like, rusty look usual to hair that is being, as hairdressers euphemistically call it, “kept its natural colour”. It shone too, with much brushing, and she wore it drawn in flat waves straight back from a beautifully defined widow’s peak.

She was looking unusually fresh and well that night, after her stay by the sea, but Beville did not notice her appearance. He was entirely engrossed in his own story, and his acute need of sympathy. As he told his story he of course told no lie, but he half-unconsciously stressed the lack of understanding between his wife and himself—her uncompromisingly highbrow tastes and his lowbrow ones; his warmth, her coldness.

“She’s worth dozens of me,” he declared, in all sincerity, “but sometimes I’ve thought she was *too* good for me; but there’s something—I can say this to you, Edith, because you and she have always been such good friends—something almost unhuman about Gracie. Sort of ‘super’. And there’s nothing super about me——”

Presently he jerked a half-finished cigarette into the fire, and drew a long breath. “So,” he added, “you see that after all poor little Violet’s plan is no good. I—I had the most wonderful letter from her—Violet, I mean—about it. Wonderful. She—she does love me, you know.”

Lady Manisty nodded. “She always adored you, Charles. I used to wonder if poor Gracie wasn’t jealous about it.”

“Oh no,” he returned, confidently. “It’d never occur to Gracie to be jealous. If she *had* been——”

"What I can't understand," Lady Manisty went on, her eyes thoughtful, "is how she can resist Violet's begging her to—to begin over."

"There you are! That's just what I mean! There is a kind of—inhumanity in Gracie——"

"No, no, it's not that. She is very human, Gracie—But," she added slowly, with a perplexed frown, "you haven't told me *why* she is divorcing you?"

It had come. Up to then he had succeeded in being vague; in just hinting; in avoiding the main issue; but now he must tell her.

"I suppose," Lady Manisty went on, still with hesitation, "it is really just an unsurmountable incompatibility?"

"No," he answered, bluntly, striking a match, "not that. It's—I hoped you'd understand, for it's hard to tell you, Edith, but she's divorcing me for—infidelity."

Lady Manisty's finely modelled face went white but for the carefully applied rouge under her brown eyes, and she gave a little gasp.

"Oh, Charles," she cried, "who on earth told her?"

Beville stared at her with his felled-ox expression. "Who told her?" he repeated, stupidly, "how d'you mean? 'Friends', I suppose, Rachel Baring for one, I believe, Monica—and then Violet says some swine wrote her anonymous letters——"

"I," interrupted the frightened woman, "never told a soul, Charles. I swear I didn't."

Even then it took a long time for the truth to penetrate his brain, and when it did he turned a deep, painful red in his amazement.

"Oh, it wasn't *that*, my dear girl," he reassured her. "She hasn't an idea about you——"

Again there was a pause, during which she pressed her handkerchief to her lips, and he stared in the most acute confusion at the rug between his feet.

"Do you mean——" she asked, at length, "you *can't* mean, Charles, that there have been others?"

"I'm afraid so, Edith. You see, I'm a pretty rotten sort of fellow— Didn't you know that?"

"I—I knew you flirted," she answered, slowly, her face broken with agony, "and of course I'd heard things. But I had no idea you'd ever cared *like that* for anyone but me——"

Tears slowly rolled down her cheeks, and he felt as if he had murdered a little girl.

"*Don't*, dear," he murmured, kneeling by her, and putting his arms round her. "I can't bear you to cry. Listen Edith, listen, darling—try to understand. They—those others weren't a bit like you. It was entirely different, before God it was! I—I always sort of think of you and Gracie together—I can't explain it, but I do. I *respect* you just as I do her, or as I'd respect a sister if I had one——"

Edith Manisty's sense of humour was not particularly acute, but even in her misery the absurdity of the man struck her.

"Oh, Charles," she cried, "what a queer creature you are! To compare me to your wife, and to the sister you never had! Get up, my dear; I'm all right now, and Harvey will be coming for the coffee-cups——"

Wiping her eyes with care, she powdered her nose, and sat back in her big chair.

"I am an idiot, my dear," she went on, quietly. "I'm *quite* old enough to know better, and of course I've heard all sorts of stories about you, but—somehow I just never believed them. You see, I loved you—I shouldn't have, but I did, and I thought you loved me."

"If you thought that," he put in, clumsily deft, "why did you pretend to forget all about that evening? Why did you keep me at arm's length as you did? It's nearly three years, you know——"

"How could I do anything else? You were Gracie's husband, and I was her friend. I couldn't be your mistress, could I? I wanted your respect, too——"

"*Humph!* Well, you've had that, all right, but if you'd been—different, I shouldn't have *done* all those dam fool things." Delighted with this happy thought, he went on more confidently: "A man can't live on plain friendship, my dear," and his eyes were reproachful.

As for her, she did what ninety-nine women of her position and her age would have done. She tried to believe the man she loved, and she jumped at the chance of blaming herself instead of him.

"I see," she said; "I couldn't possibly have—you *know*—but I should have told you I couldn't. I should have talked it over with you. Men and women *have* loved each other enough to—to give up that side of love—and if I hadn't been a fool you *would* have been different. You're quite right about that; I see it now, my dearest——"

He gave a nervous, bark-like cough. "Very generous of you, Edith," he murmured, "but you mustn't blame yourself too much. I—I was greatly to blame, too. You see, for years I've never been exactly faithful to Gracie. Not altogether. I—I loved her very much, and I—I admired her—she's a most wonderful woman—but, I can't say I treated her perfectly. You see, fine though she was, she didn't precisely *hold* me. And I'm a weak sort of fellow in some ways, and I needed a bit of help, and she didn't give me any. You see, long before—*er*—that evening in Hertford Street, she and I had sort of drifted apart——" He stammered and broke off, for it was perfectly true that he had for Edith Manisty much the same admiration and respect that he had always had for his wife, and this discussion embarrassed him. "You see, my dear," he went on, slowly, "after that long illness of hers, she—*er*—we——" he could not go on.

"I know, Charles, dear," she surprised him by saying, with a little lift of her head. "You told me—don't you remember?—that evening? If you *hadn't* told me——"

"Oh! I told you, did I? Well, I was mad keen on

you, Edith, I'd lost my head, you know, and I hardly knew what I was saying——"

This was becoming too much for him, and he glanced at the clock as at a rescuer. "I'm afraid I must get along now," he went on briskly, and rising. "I've promised Derek Babbacombe and Harry Benchester to play billiards with them—they'll be waiting for me——"

Lady Manisty rose, too, and stood looking gravely at him.

"I see," she said. "But before you go I'd like to ask you one thing, Charles. *Did* you love me? Ever, I mean. You see it's very important for me to know that."

He gazed at her for what to her seemed a long time.

She really was very like Gracie; he reflected, in her air of breeding, her dignity, the quiet of her voice. And how amazingly innocent she was. How *could* she, a woman of her age, have failed to understand his story!

"Love you?" he answered gently. "Of course I did, my dear. You're the only woman but Gracie that I ever *did* love, and there you have the truth."

And he believed this to be the truth, as in a way it was. Here was a woman to whom a man could contentedly come home day after day for lunch and for dinner; a woman with whom a fellow would be proud to go to parties, whom a fellow would be proud to show at the Opera. And she loved him, and Gracie—didn't——

"Thank God," Edith Manisty was saying, untempestuous tears in her eyes, "for I have always loved you, Charles, and I always shall."

"Edith! What a darling you are——"

But she drew back from his too emotional approach. "No, no. You mustn't kiss me, and there's something I want to tell you, Charles. I am honestly sorry for the break-up of your home, and for poor little Violet's unhappiness, but I can't be less than honest with you, so I'll tell you the truth——"

"Yes, my dear?" ("How beautifully her hair shone; what

a beautiful neck she had! If only Gracie had had some of her warmth——')

"It's this," she went on, slowly. "If, after the divorce, you—you don't want me, I shan't have a word to say; that will be your affair. But——" and her smile was very lovely, very tender, "if you *would* like to have me as your wife, I shall be happy—and *proud*—to marry you."

Fortunately for Beville in his bewilderment, Harvey at that moment came in to call Lady Manisty to the telephone, and with a warm handshake and a promise to ring her up the next day, the embarrassed man escaped.

For a long time he remembered the scent of the lilacs beyond the railings that night, as he stood, hat in hand, cooling his burning face in the damp, soft air. "Oh, my God," he said, aloud. Then, for it was, he felt, no use for him to go home to bed, as he would only lie awake and think, he made up his mind to go for a walk. 'I must answer Violet's letter first thing to-morrow,' he told himself, 'and I'll read it again before I go to sleep. It's a lovely letter, but, Christ, how dreadful that she should have had to write it! Perfectly *damnable* that she should have known at all. Never heard of such a thing in my life—I'll go to the Club and read it through again and then I'll go for a long tramp and think out what I want to say——'

The night had now made up its mind to remain fine, and the river, he reflected, would be lovely from one of the bridges. 'I might go and have a drink and a talk with Quincy,' his thoughts went on. 'She's always jolly, and she's got a lot of common sense, too——'

It is possible that he might have gone to Mrs. Paull's but for his finding a letter at his Club urging him to do so. "Do blow in to-night, latish, dear Charles," she had written in her voluntarily complicated hand, on mustard-coloured paper. "It's ages since we met, you know, and other men do bore me so! Do come——"

So he didn't go, though he passed her house on his walk, and noted with a grin that the drawing-room was

dark. 'I suppose,' he pondered, pausing and gazing up at the unlit windows, 'that I *was* in love with Quincy.' And then with a chuckle he went on, quoting to himself something he had read in some French book :

*"On s'enlace, et puis un jour
On s'en lasse—et c'est l'amour."*

'A lot of truth in that,' he added to himself, standing mid-bridge and looking at the moon-silvered water—'an awful lot!'

The exercise was relieving and comforting, and he had ceased to think of his poor Edith. Neither was he now thinking of his Gracie. Without really knowing it he was a true lover of the sky in its multitudinous phases, and of air, and that night the sky and the air were fine and consoling. Gracie didn't love him, she had been very cruel to him in not telling him that she knew, and she was going to marry Vincent. 'Well—how any woman could marry a poor little creature like Vincent, beats me, but if she wants to she must, and I won't complain. So far as that goes, most men would prefer Edith to her——'

But unfortunately he himself did not prefer Edith to Gracie and he knew it, though he was now refusing to contemplate that part of the situation. He was concerned not with them but with Violet. His daughter. His lovely, flat-nosed little Violet. It was absolutely hideous and horrible that she should know, but though she knew—this was the great point—she loved him just the same. That was his triumph; that although she couldn't of course *admire* him as she had done before, by God's grace she could, and did, still love him. 'And that,' he concluded, finally turning towards home, 'is enough for me. I'll write her a long letter to-morrow—I'll take my time and write her a corker. And besides, I'll be seeing her very soon again—pretty well any day now—and then I'll just begin

over. I'll be so good that she'll forget all those dreadful things. . . .'

As he recrossed the bridge he felt so much happier that he was humming to himself, to the suspicious surprise of a passing policeman. Gentlemen, reflected the policeman, often sing on their way home at half-past one in the morning, but not sober ones. And this big man with a touch of the sailor's roll in his gait was obviously as sober as a judge.

Beville's last thought as he dropped asleep was still about Violet. 'I'll answer that topping letter of hers,' he reflected, drowsily, 'the very first thing in the morning——'

CHAPTER EIGHT

BUT it took him over two hours to answer that letter, and his own was only three pages of his big, childish writing.

Never an easy writer, his present state of embarrassment and indignation—his embarrassment and indignation had taken possession of him again as he wrote—seemed to put a malign spell on his splendid, fat fountain pen, and to make his always slow mind flounder more than ever.

"I don't see," he wrote finally, "why, after that splendid letter you sent me, you didn't stick to your plan and see me before you spoke to your mother again. Why did you rush things so? Did anything happen?"

"I was terribly disappointed not to see you, my darling, but your letter made up for everything. Oh, Violet, I can't tell you how I hate your knowing. It makes me just *sick*, I can tell you! And to think of your overhearing poor Gracie's telling His Ex. Like something in a book. Something that one can't *believe* in, somehow, it's so awful. Like that woman in the East End who boiled her twins in her clothes-boiler or something. So help me God, Violet," he went on, after attempting to correct and make more shapely the foregoing sentences, "I'd rather have cut my throat than have had you go through that. My *poor* little sweetheart, the thought of you trying to remember and not being able to—it makes me feel as if I'd been kicked in the stomach by a horse. It's hell, darling, the whole business.

"I know it's my own fault, most of it, but *that* doesn't do me any good. And I can't try to explain to you. It wouldn't be decent. It would be foul for me to write to a girl like you about a man like me. See? You must just try to forgive me. I know you'll try, and you must

succeed, or I can't bear it. I love you more than anything on the earth. Always have. You know that. Oh, God, I ought to be killed for hurting you so. Your mother, too. If she'd told me she knew, I might have got better, but I hadn't an idea she did. (*Knew*, I mean.) Well, my Heart, this is the eleventh, and you said she'd be going to stay with Uncle Cyprian at Ringborough the sixteenth. May I come down to you the seventeenth? Ask Bob if he'd mind—" These last five words he carefully erased with his penknife. He'd be damned if he'd cringe to Bob Quintana. To Bob, who'd looked at him as he did yesterday at lunch; as if he loathed him. "Hang it," he muttered, "Saucers Hall is Violet's house now, and she can ask whomever she likes there——"

As he scratched out the too humble words, his tongue curled over one corner of his upper lip, he was interrupted.

In his fear of solitude he had lunched at his club, and was writing there now, when suddenly his privacy was ruthlessly invaded.

"Hello, George," he grunted in reply, "how are you?"

"Top-hole, old man. How's yourself?"

George Carstairs was the man who, having been caught out by his wife in a love-affair with a lady at the Gaiety Theatre, had been a reformed character for some years. And George Carstairs was now grinning, and looking very knowing.

"What's happened to your face," asked Beville crossly, "to make it look like that?"

"That's a smile, that is, Charles, old lad," the other man returned, his imperturbability unshattered by the insult. "A little bird has told me that you and Gracie have quarrelled, and I've come to condole with you. Who's it about?"

Beville had always been fond of silly old George, but silly old George now seemed to him a thing of unbearable offensiveness. "Mind your own business," he growled, "I'm writing a letter."

"No! I thought you were riding a point-to-point! 'Pon my soul I did! But don't be shirty, Muffin. Tell an old pal about it. Pour out your woes on this broad and sympathetic shoulder. Can it be that your loves with the fair Drusilla have emerged from the secrecy we all so admired?"

"Oh, go to hell," roared Beville furiously, greatly startling a distinguished member of the club who was just then penning a note to a seedsman about some bulbs that had persisted in maintaining their bulb-like status despite the warmth of spring.

"Shut up, George, you idiot——"

"You have wounded a tender heart, and spurned one who, having passed that way himself, might have been able to soothe you with sympathy and counsel——"

And then, suddenly grave, the rotund and rosy little man leaned down and added quietly: "Joking aside, old chap, I'm awfully sorry about it. Gracie's such a *dear* woman, and you know I've always thought you one of the best——"

"Thanks, George. Jolly kind of you, old man, but——er——nothing *settled* yet, you know, and Violet and I rather hope——"

"Good! Only I've always felt you were running for a purler, old man. The marvel to me was not that Gracie's found out, but that she never found out before!"

"She *did*," returned Beville gloomily. "That's the worst of it. Come and have a drink, old fellow," he added, his face suddenly brighter, "and I'll tell you about it. After all, George, a fellow must talk to someone, and you and I are very old friends——"

Carstairs waited while his friend finished his letter, and then the two made their way to the smoke-room and settled down for a long talk.

"—so," Beville concluded, after a long, rambling recital, "there you are! Pretty bad, isn't it?"

"Damn bad, Charles. When Eva caught me out with

Maggie Royston, she caught me out, and she gave me—well, you'll never get within a mile of it with Gracie. You'll remember that Eva was an Everest-Holmsley——”

Beville nodded. He did remember.

“But the bright spot in *my* stormy Heaven,” his friend went on, setting down his glass, “was that there was *only* Maggie. Maggie was a host in herself, so to speak, but there was only one *of* her. Whereas you, God help you, there's dozens! It's *awful*, Charles, awful!”

“It is. It's perfectly horrible, George. Have another?”

“No, thanks, I've had three, and I've got to meet Eva at Kitty's for tea. A nose like a bloodhound, Kitty has—Well, old fellow,” Colonel Carstairs added, rising as he glanced at the clock, “I'll be off. Give my love—*er*—well, to *Violet*—when you go down. Glad she's well. And cheer up, old man, to-morrow's a day, too——”

“Thanks, George. George, did Eva want to divorce you?” Beville hurried on, hating to be left alone, and into George Carstairs's fishy Carstairs eye came a gleam.

“Eva? Not *her*. I couldn't have bribed her to—even if I'd wanted to,” he added hastily, “which, of course, I *didn't*. But Dolly Benchester's my cousin, you know, and I went through all that with *her*, so I know. And if you ask me, Muffin,” the mentor added solemnly, “you might as well try to tear a nice fat rat from a terrier's teeth as to tear the divorce complex from a woman who fancies herself insulted——”

“Gracie hasn't any complex,” interrupted Beville firmly, “and she isn't ‘fancying’ a damn thing. I've been an awful swine, George, and you know it as well as I do——”

“Oh, well, have a heart, old horse! Don't be so damn rough on yourself. I know one or two things about Alice Anthony, and Marion Orme-Blakely was a—a kind of illicit sister-in-law to me for years. Poor old Chips ruined himself for her, you know— And as to Drusilla Battle, there's only one word for *her*—or rather two——” He said them both.

Beville regarded him with extreme mournfulness. "She can play the piano like—Melville Gideon," he commented simply, "and—I'm awfully sorry for her, George."

"I know. They all are. Well, so long as you see through her, and she won't be trying to make you *marry* her— Bye-bye, Muffin, see you soon. Keep smiling, old son——"

And he was gone, leaving Beville feeling deserted by the whole world.

It was at this psychological crisis that Mrs. Paull's card was brought to him, together with the information that the lady was waiting in her car.

Charles Beville's face cleared. He'd go, by Jove he would. Quincy was a jolly soul, and she was clever, and she could make him laugh. It would do him good to laugh, by Jove!

"You didn't ring up last night," she began abruptly as he sat down beside her in her rather too ornate car, "but I've just heard that you're in trouble. So I've come to you. After all, what else are friends for?"

"You're a dear, Quincy! I'm awfully glad to see you—I couldn't manage last night, and it has been *ages*——"

"Well," drawled the Iowan, "I wasn't exactly met with unbridled rapture by your wife when I blew in to inquire for your dotter, was I?"

"You were not. On the other hand, did you *expect* unbridled rapture from my wife? You've never been what I call one of her first favourites, have you!"

"No. Nor she one of mine. I adore *you*, Charlie boy, but Lady Grace is too much like a filleted herring—a dried one—to suit me. Yes, I *am* vulgar, and that was a most tasteless remark, so you needn't say it!"

She laughed, showing, such were the size and the displacement of her mouth, far more dazzlingly white, too large, teeth than other people display, and something in her loud laugh inexplicably cheered the man.

"My word, but I'm glad to see you, Quincy! Where are you taking me, by the way?"

"Home. To Cheyne Walk. I've ordered a bang-up dinner for you, and we shall be alone, so you can pour out all your woes to me——"

"When I'm with you," he returned promptly, "I *haven't* any woes."

Again she laughed, and he felt still more relieved and easy in his mind.

He was afraid of Drusilla Battle because the dangerously attractive little degenerate was in love with him, and he was afraid of Edith Manisty because she really loved him, but he knew that Mrs. Paull no more loved him than he loved her, so with her he was not afraid, which was a mistake.

Quincy Paull, it is true, neither loved nor was in love with him, but she was in truth a far greater menace to his liberty than either of the other two women.

She did not need money, but she was tired of living on the outskirts of society, and realized perfectly that she had more than once compromised herself since her arrival in England three or four years before.

She entertained magnificently, knew how to attract great musical artists to her house, and how to make them feel so at home that they would play or sing, as the case might be, till dawn, at her semi-Bohemian, wholly delightful musical evenings. And many people came to these parties, people of what she in her American-French lingo always referred to as "the very best *monde*". Unfortunately, most of these people were men, their wives not having taken kindly to the rather noisy, apparently rootless lady.

And three weeks before that April afternoon Mrs. Paull had had a birthday. Her thirty-fifth; a horrid birthday for nearly every woman.

So, being eminently practical, she had sat down, that day, in her huge and flamboyant studio, and made a list of the various men whom, could she compass it, she might

with advantage marry; and to this list Charles Beville's name had been added at lunch that day, when her right-hand man, Mr. Herbert Stanton, had told her about the impending divorce.

"Are you *sure*, Bertie?" she asked delightedly. "You wouldn't think Lady Grace had the guts to divorce him! And why *now*, after twenty years of it? *Are you sure?*"

"Yes, I am, Quince, old dear. I got it from Basil Freeth, and *he*, of course, got it straight from Dru."

"Is *that* still on? La Battle and Beville?"

Mr. Stanton nodded, and refilled his beautiful Venetian goblet with champagne cup. "Off and on, Basil says. Drusilla's absolutely *crazy* about him, and you know what she *is*——"

"I *do*. And of course he, poor old mutt, is as weak as a stranded jellyfish. Like lots of those great big Englishmen."

"*Uh-huh*. He's a thundering good sort, though. Basil says he gave her a cheque for five hundred not long ago, without turning a hair."

"Gawd," was Mrs. Paull's absent-minded comment.

Then she had quite simply announced her plan. "I *like* Beville, Bertie," she said, slowly, "and I think I'll have a shot at him."

"I thought you'd *had* your shot," grinned the young man, "and winged him!"

"Yes, but I don't mean that," she replied unruffled. "I mean it's time I settled down. Frank Paull died six weeks ago, and I was thirty the other day, and I'd like a real nice old-fashioned—*husband*——"

Stanton stared. "But—but," he stammered, "Sir Charles Beville wouldn't marry you, my lamb!"

She tossed her head. "Wouldn't he? Well, I'd like to know why he wouldn't——!"

And before half an hour had passed, Mr. Stanton had changed his mind. It was perhaps convenient to himself, this change of mind, for he was one of the new type of

young Englishmen who derive most of their material comforts from their women-friends.

He "advised" Mrs. Paull in the matters of her clothes, and her house—his taste was exquisite—he devised wonderful floral decorations for her dinner-table, he fetched and carried for her in a hundred ways, and, calling him her private secretary, she showered gifts—chiefly small gold articles—on him.

He was a slim youth, with a queer liking for chocolate-brown suits, ties, and socks, and he wore small whiskers like a toreador's, and a gold bangle, just visible through the silk, round one of his ankles.

"He *looks*," Mrs. Paull was wont to say, "like a Nancy-boy, but he *isn't* one."

And he wasn't.

Clever, unscrupulous, with an innate love of intrigue, he was the young woman's most intimate friend, their two cynicisms, hers blatant and half a pose, his sincere and, except to her, rather secret, made a firm basis for a sexless camaraderie that was to both of them intensely useful.

And as Charles Beville was borne swiftly to Chelsea in the big, too blue, and too much decorated French car, young Mr. Stanton sat in his study at the top of Mrs. Paull's beautiful old house, arranging the menus and place-cards for her next dinner-party, whistling softly as he did so.

'Why she *wants* to marry that dull dog,' he was thinking, 'beats Banagher, and Banagher beats the devil, but she must be pretty damned sure, or she wouldn't have bet me fifty quid! . . . Well, I shouldn't be beaten by a hoary old trick like that, but then I'm not stupid, nor old, and His Nibs is both——'

.

Chinese and Japanese art were, to Charles Beville, utterly hideous. He knew something about the fine old French and English furniture that filled his own two houses, and

from Edith Manisty he had learnt a little about more ancient things, but Mrs. Paull's cherished soapstone fifteenth-century Chinese Goddess of Mercy left him, as he put it, icy. "She has no nose," he would add, "and no eyebrows, and her figger's all covered up by that hideous sort of cloak thing. No, Quincy, sorry, but your goddess makes me tired."

"You're a mutt, Charles. You're a Philistine. Can't you even see how heavenly my Chinese *painting* is? My exquisite white horse?"

"It may," he returned, unashamed, "be a *Chinese* horse. That's why his neck's thicker than his barrel, and why his head's like a fish's——"

But on the other hand he delighted in all that was wrong in his friend's studio; in the six-foot-square satin and velvet pillows of all colours, that lay about the highly-polished red-tiled floor; the strips of ancient brocade that without rhyme or reason hung like banners from the walls; in the coloured candles, thick as a man's arm, and strongly scented, that burnt at night in groups in the corners of the room.

And the Félicien Rops engravings, that so startled most people, did not shock him, for they made him laugh. To him they were extremely funny; he roared at them.

One end of the studio was four feet higher than the rest of the floor, and here stood a concert grand piano—a Bechstein chosen by M. Cortot—a very fine old harp, and several music-stands and carefully selected chairs for makers of chamber-music.

The studio was reached from the house by a covered gallery called the Bridge, the house-end of the Bridge opening on to the broad landing between the ground- and the first-floors.

Downstairs was the dining-room and the study, upstairs—six steps above the landing—the drawing-room, Mrs. Paull's bedroom, her boudoir, and her black-and-gold bath-room. Above were three or four guest-rooms.

On arriving at Cheyne Walk that afternoon, Charles Beville was given a very potent cocktail that rather reminded him of Miss Battle's, and which, Mrs. Paull told him, was called an Iroquois Scalp-Raiser.

Then he had tea, while his hostess told him a string of extremely funny, quite unprintable stories. She told a naughty story better than any woman in town, and this he now said to her. "They're the best stories in themselves," he added, "but you also *tell* them better. Now Drusilla Battle has a fine line of tales, but—somehow—she tells them wrong. I can't exactly explain it, but somehow she embarrasses me——"

"Oh, now, *really*, Charles," laughed his hostess, who had changed into a white and sealing-wax red garment that rather bewilderingly revealed her bodily perfections.

"I know, Quincy, I know! But it's true. She wouldn't *dare* tell that last one of yours, about the Sphinx; it'd be—disgusting if she did, and it's just screamingly funny when *you* tell it——"

He was really puzzling his head as to why this should be so, and after a moment she told him.

"It's because she's just all sex," she explained. "She's all sex, and I—am not. That's the difference."

"*H'm!*"

"Oh, yes, I know, but I'm right, just the same, my dear. I'm not a fish, but I'm a normal woman, whereas for all I can gather your little *chère amie* is—well! *L'étoffe chaude, quoi?*"

He nodded. "No doubt you're right, my dear, but poor little Dru couldn't be like you if she tried. Your tennis, and fencing—and your swimming—keep you fit, and she has no more muscle than a canary. By the way," he went on, interestedly, "how is your fencing getting on?"

"Well, that lamb Scipione is much pleased with me. I *do* love it, Charles! And I have two ju jitsu lessons a week now, too. In another month I'll be able to throw you over

my shoulder. It's perfectly *wonderful*, really— Have the other half of your Scalp-Raiser——”

“No, thanks. Awfully strong they are——”

“That,” she explained, filling his glass, “is only the vodka! Don't be silly, Charles; lap it up, and tell me about the divorce.”

And without details he told her, she listening quietly and, for once, saying little.

“Of course,” he went on rather repetitively, emptying his glass, “it's entirely my fault. I've played the silly ass, and I deserve all I get. Only I think she should have told me that she *knew*. It's all m-my fault, but I don't think it was fair of her not to tell me that she *kn-knew*——”

(“That's a grand cocktail,” reflected Mrs. Paull, hopefully.)

“Of course she should have told you,” she agreed, with precisely the correct amount of warmth in her brassy yet not unpleasant voice. “Lady Grace never liked me, and she had every reason for not liking me, but I know a nice woman when I see one—and a *good* one—so I've always admired her. But—you're right, my dear. I don't think she *has* been very generous to you. *I'd* never have done it—kept quiet, and let you get in deeper and deeper to suit her own purposes, and then come down on you out of the blue— Poor Charles! I'm *very* sorry for you, my dear——”

“Thanks, Quincy. Jolly good of you. That's just what it was: a bolt from the blue. Never so shocked in my life——”

Charles Beville was not drunk, but he was certainly much less sober than he usually was, and his sense of proportion and some of his inhibitions had gone.

He had grown pale, as was his way on those rare occasions when he drank too much for his self-control, and his face, perceptibly thinner in the stress of the last few days, had thereby gained in beauty and distinction. He was a really handsome man as he sat there in the big black

chair, and Quincy Paull warmed to her task. After all, if she didn't catch him, someone else would, and she, who was really rather fond of him, and who had a brain, would make him an excellent wife. 'He really *is* a dear,' she reflected, watching him with a great wariness behind the sympathy in her lucent green eyes, 'and he's exactly what I need. I'll turn that awful old house into a palace, and I'll make him as happy as a bird——'

Glancing at her emerald wrist-watch, she rose and went to him. "Cheer up, dear," she said gently, "nobody minds a divorce nowadays, you know, and you *know* you want Lady Grace to be happy——"

"Of course I do. I've been an awful swine to her, but I—I've always admired my wife more than any woman I know— But," he added sharply, "we won't discuss her if you don't mind. Rather not, you know——"

She nodded. She was a very subtle woman, but this occasion needed no subtlety, and she was no spendthrift.

Her method was definite, swift, and sure, and when, five minutes later, Mr. Herbert Stanton sauntered casually into the room, and stood, thunderstruck, staring at the two, there was no need for words.

Stanton played his part well, stammering something incoherent, and then making an uncompromising bolt of it.

"Good God," murmured Beville, thoroughly sobered, and correcting what Herrick so admired in his Julia. "Good God——"

And to his horror Mrs. Paull subsided into a confused heap of red-and-white chiffon, and burst into what he honestly believed to be tears.

He walked to the nearest window and stood staring out at the river he so loved because it was so triumphantly English! 'Damned fool I am. *The* bloodiest fool! That broken-wristed little sweep'll tell everybody! By God, I ought to have stopped him——'

He would have given half of all that he possessed to be

able to make undone the events of the last ten minutes. The woman's sobbing seemed literally to tear at his heart; she had been a good friend to him, kind, hospitable, and trusting, and he had let her in for this. Damn that cocktail— His distress was exaggerated, and it was sincere, but at the back of his mind lay a small, warm core of consolation. 'Thank God,' he thought, 'her poor devil of a husband's still alive.' And he was ashamed of himself for thinking it.

"Quincy," he said, going towards her, "for Heaven's sake stop crying. I—I can't stand it. Never heard you cry before, my dear——"

She lay quieter, but did not answer, and he went on with difficulty: "I'll go and see Stanton and—and make him understand——"

"Ha, ha," she laughed hysterically. "*Ha, ha, ha!* Understand! Don't be a fool, Charles! And everyone in town will know, within twenty-four hours. I shouldn't have let you kiss me——"

"Nonsense. He won't say a word. After all, what business is it of his?"

She sat up, wiping her eyes, suddenly as solemn as a tomb. "No business, of course," she agreed brokenly, "only he's so horribly *jealous*——"

"Jealous? Of you? That little monkey?"

"He's loved me for years," she replied with impressive simplicity, and Beville was silenced.

They talked for half an hour, and he was full of admiration for his victim's dignity and quiet. Gone the stridency that had always a little irritated him, gone the domineering manner he had disliked; of the clever, sharp-tongued, amusing, hail-fellow-well-met young woman remained a broken, frightened, resigned girl, who asked nothing of him, who even tried to console his distress in this her undoing.

"Don't you bother," she said at last, "it's my own fault, of course. But if *only* it wasn't Bertie! He's a dear in

many ways, but his tongue is awful—" She rose. "Heavens, it's after seven! Listen, dear," she went on, laying one of her very lovely hands on his arms, "we won't discuss all this any more. Words can't help, and you and I are too good friends to bore each other. I ordered dinner for half-past seven; as it's such a heavenly day I thought we might drive down to Brighton or somewhere, afterwards. It's moonlight, you know——"

Beville wanted to go home. He was sick and tired of being in Cheyne Walk, and he wanted to get away from Mrs. Paull. He longed to get back to his own house, and have dinner alone with dear old Domenico to wait on him: he wanted to be miserable in peace, about Violet. Here he was, having forgotten Violet for hours!

'God in Heaven, what an ass I am,' he thought, sick with disgust.

By an effort he managed not to hate Quincy Paull, and to do what he considered to be his duty as a gentleman.

"That'll be delightful," he agreed. "Don't you worry, my dear. Stanton's not a bounder, you know—we'll manage him somehow. And now, if I may, I'll go down and have a wash and brush-up——"

As he brushed his hair in the luxuriously fitted cloak-room, he again thanked God that that poor dipsomaniac was still alive.

.

The dinner was a delicious and unusual one, for Mrs. Paull knew a great deal about food, and understood just how to please her gourmet, as she called Beville.

He resolutely refused a cunningly concocted cocktail, for he meant to keep his head for the rest of the evening, but she gave him a bottle of Château Margeaux that soothed and consoled him.

It was, he thought, magnificent of Quincy to behave so well; damned plucky, too. And how well she was looking! She wore a new black frock in which her splendid bosom

and arms showed to perfection, and though pale, he thought he had never seen her look better.

She was a little subdued, but she was a perfect hostess, and as has been said, she was extremely intelligent. Even Beville realized that her talk that evening was something brilliantly unusual, and when, over their coffee and "fine", as she always called cognac, she kept him in roars of delighted laughter. Again he had forgotten Violet and the divorce.

"My word, Quincy," he gasped after a while, mopping his eyes, "you are a wonder!"

Suddenly grave, she gazed at him. "I'm only doing my best, dear," she answered quietly, and his heart sank.

During dinner the fickle April weather had changed, and it was raining, so the motor-ride had to be abandoned, but he was not sorry; it was delightful to sit in the skilfully lighted studio and hear the soft pelt on the glass roof.

Comfortable, that's what Beville knew himself to be, and comfort was one of his godlings. Poor Dora, he reflected, had in her humble way known how to make him comfortable; Alice had *not* known how, nor his beautiful Conchita, but Edith's home had never failed to give him that delicious feeling of "benessere"—*what* a language Italian was!—and even naughty little Drusilla had her own way of instilling into him that luxurious sensation of cosiness. . . . Now Gracie, his undirected thoughts wandered on, as his hostess busied herself with her elaborate coffee-machine, wasn't a cosy person. Not exactly, though he loved her to be knitting by the library fire. She looked comfortable enough herself, but she didn't—at least, for years she hadn't taken—any trouble to make *him* comfortable. And not a really soft cushion in the house!

He was sitting on a kind of round mattress of cloth-of-gold and scarlet brocade, and between his broad back and the side of a divan, Mrs. Paull had tucked a fat silver-and-blue pillow that was the last note of exquisite ease. . . .

It was then that she again mentioned Bertie Stanton. He was a dear, she said, but he was a chatterbox——

"Why don't you ring him up? Ask him to come and see you——"

"Yes," she agreed slowly, "I might. But——there isn't much to say, is there?"

"No." His face was as grave as hers; they might have been discussing the budget.

And then Stanton, who had had an excellent dinner upstairs, came in complaining of the wet shoes he had just carefully acquired in the garden.

"A hell of a night," he added as he sat down, and then there fell on the room a silence that Beville thought would never end. He felt unspeakably ashamed and embarrassed before the quiet gaze of this boy who might easily have been his son, and whom a pitiless God of Irony had set in the judgment seat above him.

Mrs. Paull sat staring into the fire, her beautiful hands loosely folded on her lap.

And at long last young Stanton spoke again. "After all, my dear," he observed paternally to his hostess, "one can't *really* be sorry about poor Paull——"

"I suppose not," she replied, her voice listless, and Beville pricked up his ears.

"How long was he in that—that place?" went on Stanton.

"Nearly six years, and of course there was never any hope, from the first——"

"Poor devil. Well, now his troubles are over, and I for one won't pretend to be sorry! As to you," the young man turned to Beville, "I'm perfectly honest, and I'll tell you frankly that I wish to Heaven Quincy'd never met you; I love her myself, and I suppose I always shall. But I've known for months how it was with her and you——so I must be decent and——congratulate you both. And now," he finished, with a well-done wry laugh, "I'll clear out."

"Hi, wait a minute——" Impatient of his ridiculous

position on the brocade mattress, Beville scrambled to his feet, and stood looking down at the neat little figure in evening dress. "There's nothing to *congratulate* Quincy and me about," he cried, "I mean—nothing new. We're the best of—*h'm!*—we're very fond of each other, and all that, but——"

"I know, I know," broke in the young man soothingly. "Let's take all that as said, as the French put it. I'm being a lot previous, no doubt, but I know about your divorce, and now, of course, poor Paull's death——"

Beville frowned; he was trying to think clearly, but something eluded him.

"Why," he asked Mrs. Paull, after a pause, "didn't you tell me your husband was dead?"

"What difference would that have made?"

This was a poser. "Well—er—I was only wondering," he answered awkwardly, "*why* you hadn't mentioned it——"

She had risen, and now laid her hands on his arm. "I—never thought about it, dear," she explained gently. "He died—poor old Frank—weeks ago, and I didn't see you till to-day——"

"And now, of course," put in Stanton brightly, "your divorce makes everything all right!"

Beville threw up his head in a sudden jerk. "You don't strike me," he declared shrewdly, "as very *jealous*——"

The young man started, and shot a glance at his fellow-conspirator, but before he had to answer, the butler came down the steps from the Bridge.

"Excuse me, Sir Charles," he said, "a gentleman on the telephone for you. A Mr. Monday I think he said——"

Charles nodded and followed him, immensely relieved by the interruption.

"Hello, Lundy?" he asked coldly, but Lundy's voice shocked and alarmed him.

"Yes, yes, Charles, *c'est moi*. Listen—I've been ringing up all over town for you. Gracie rang me up an hour ago.

Violet is ill. She's had a kind of heart attack, and they want you."

For a long moment Beville could not answer. Then he said quietly: "Right. I'll get home in a taxi and be off in half an hour. Are you coming with me, Vincent?"

"I'd—I'd like to, Charles——"

Beville sent a message to Mrs. Paull, caught up his hat and stick, and plunged into the wet darkness.

And half an hour later Lundy and he, old friends, new enemies, were rushing in silence towards Suffolk.

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CHAPTER NINE

SAUCERS HALL stood in a shallow hollow at the eastern side of the little old village of Saucers.

It was a small, originally Tudor house with a roomier, Queen Anne wing so artfully added to its back and western end that from the front only one or two graceful chimneys showed above the flat, balustraded roof of the eastern half of the façade.

The older part of the house, though of the normal height of most two-storied residences, had but one story, except at the western end where two flat gables gave it an extra row of bedrooms, back of which stretched the Queen Anne wing.

The façade was an unusual one, for along it stretched a row of nine tall windows, each containing twelve panes of ancient glass, and, as only a narrow strip of stone separated these windows one from the other, the effect of the house was of a house of glass.

By some miracle due no doubt to the place's remoteness, the original glass had never been broken, and the uneven, iridescent, flawed panes shone in the sun like soap-bubbles, and by moonlight the house seemed of the fabric of a dream.

Slightly to the east of the centre of the façade stood a squat, square stone tower, no higher than the roof, and covered with ivy, and here was not only the front door, but a small window.

The whole façade was covered by delicate creepers cut square to the windows, only the tower retaining its century-old growth of ivy, but the balustrade across the eastern roof, lace-like and unstained by time or lichens, was kept free from any vegetation, so that its beauty was unblemished, undimmed.

When Beville's car reached the gates and came slowly

up the drive, the rain and storm were over, and a large moon rode in triumph in a clear sky, so that the old house was seen at its most magical.

"*Mon Dieu!*" cried the eternal artist in Vincent Lundy, his breath catching at its beauty.

No internal light combated the silvery flood that poured on it like a benison from the sky, and those nine windows shimmered like scraps of rainbows, but in the gabled windows to the left the two men saw lamplight, and as the car drew up at the door in the tower, electric light sprang out in the lower rooms, and the door opened noiselessly.

It was Quintana, ghastly white and haggard, a finger to his unshaven lips.

"Don't make any noise, please," he said peremptorily; "leave the car where it is, Sir Charles, it's perfectly safe there——"

"How is she, Bob? How is she?"

Both men had spoken, but it was Lundy whom he answered. "She's alive," he said shortly. "Come in."

They followed him through the little tower-room to the hall, and he led them to the left, where a shallow staircase wound upwards. "Lady Grace," he went on in that flat, expressionless voice that was somehow so terrifying to Beville, "is in Violet's sitting-room. You'll find some food, and drinks, there— You show him the way, Lundy——"

And Beville followed the painter up the shallow oak stairs.

Violet's room was in the western gable, but this door Lundy passed, and turning the corner towards the north, opened another.

Here Lady Grace sat huddled over a bright fire, a forgotten cup of tea at her elbow. She looked up, but did not speak, as the two men came in, and Beville dared not break in on her tragic silence.

Lundy handed him a glass, which he emptied, and for which he felt better, after which he munched a couple of

sandwiches. He had never before been at Saucers, though he had seen photographs of it, and now he sat blankly staring round the charming room.

Over the fire-place hung Lundy's portrait of Lady Grace, and a big photograph of himself, in a leather frame, stood on the writing-table.

A delightful, artistic, likeable room; and behind that shining door lay Violet, dying.

Lundy sat with folded arms, his fine head hanging forward, his eyes gleaming like fire in their great sockets; Lady Grace, looking incredibly old, incredibly stony, had not moved again.

And something must happen, someone must speak, or he, Charles Beville, would, he felt, go raving mad.

"Gracie," he said suddenly, in a harsh undertone, "tell me about her. You *must* tell me——"

"I—I beg your pardon," she murmured, "I forgot. She—she fainted, you know. We—couldn't bring her to for—a long time. It was about four, I suppose. The doctor—is alarmed. It's her heart."

"Is there—no hope?"

"Yes. Yes, of course there's hope, Charles," it was Lundy who answered, "because she is still alive— The doctor will explain it to you. He's coming back, isn't he, Gracie?"

"Yes. He had to go to a bad confinement, but he promised to come back as soon as he could."

"Is he a *good* doctor?" Beville snapped out the question.

"Bob says he is *very* good, Charles. And Bob has sent for Sir Philip Jackson, too."

"Why not Webb?"

"Bob wanted Jackson," answered Lundy.

The three sat there, the husband, the wife, and the man of whom she meant to make her future husband; no one said any more.

Nearly an hour passed, and then a car came slowly up the drive, and they all knew it was the doctor.

They heard the house-door open, and then slow, quiet footsteps coming up the stairs.

"That's *two* people," muttered Beville, suspicious he knew not of what.

"The doctor and Bob," said Lady Grace, as the corridor of the bedroom closed quietly.

Beville thought that if he could open his mouth and roar loudly it might ease the awful tightness in his head. Yes, he wanted to roar his grief; to bellow——

A chair moved softly in the bedroom, and a woman's voice spoke, very low——

"The nurse, dear," explained Lady Grace, absently. "A London Hospital nurse, a friend of Bob's who has been staying with her sister a few miles away—very fortunately for us——"

And then, as the bedroom door opened, Charles Beville stepped swiftly to his wife's side and drew her arm through his. He had forgotten Vincent, forgotten the divorce, forgotten his sins against her, and her anger with him. She was his wife, and he was her husband, and they stood together to hear the doctor's verdict about their child.

"Mrs. Quintana," said Doctor Weston in a low voice, "is—no worse. And Sir Philip Jackson will be here by nine. It's now," he added, snapping open his watch disregardful of the clock, "nearly five."

"Is—is there any hope?"

Doctor Weston glanced without surprise at the big man who put the question; it was quite plain that the big man was Lady Grace's husband.

"There is now," he answered slowly, "some hope for her recovery from this attack, but—she is very dangerously ill. But let me advise you to go to bed for a few hours, Lady Grace—and you, too, Mr. Lundy. You are both exhausted, and you can't help by sitting up——"

"I'll lie down here—on the chesterfield," said Lady Grace, but Beville shook his head. "No, dear," he corrected, gently but unmistakably authoritative; "you

must go to bed—really to bed, and try to sleep. I will sit here, and I give you my word I'll wake you the minute—the minute the nurse tells me of any change."

Lundy's ghastly, greenish-white face turned a shade more green, and the doctor wondered why.

The husband, he thought, looked a very good fellow, and he'd look after that poor broken-hearted woman all right, even if——

Lady Grace sighed, bowed to the doctor, and went to the door. "Come with me, Charles," she said, turning. "I must show you where my room is——"

When the doctor and Lundy were left alone, the doctor took a small whisky-and-soda, and advised the other man to do the same. "You've had a terrible drive," he said with a little old-fashioned bow, raising his glass, "and you are greatly over-tired. Why do you not follow Lady Grace's example, and try to get some sleep?"

"Yes, I will, I will——"

As he agreed, Beville came back into the room. He had changed his boots for a pair of leather slippers, and he had on an ancient shooting-coat that he loved to wear at times in lieu of a dressing-gown.

"My wife," he began, "is all in, and she'll soon be asleep. I've given her some aspirin and made her get really *into* bed. No good lying *on* a bed, you know. Hello, Vincent," he broke off to cry anxiously. "What's wrong with you? Look out, Doctor, he's going to faint——"

But Lundy did not faint; he was not ill; Beville's perfectly unconscious reassumption of the manner of a husband had flayed him with jealousy, and it was that that had suddenly ravaged his face in such an alarming way.

"Good night," he said shortly to the doctor. "Good night, Beville," and he marched out of the room in a manner that made the doctor stare at him in surprise.

"My daughter is his god-daughter," explained Beville, "and he adores her——"

"I see."

Then Charles Beville went on quietly: "Doctor, that girl of mine is—she's the dearest thing in the whole world to me——"

"She is your only child, Sir Charles?"

Beville hesitated for a moment, and then said quietly: "She is our only child. I'd die for her, if it could do her any good. I honestly would. . . . Tell me just what her chances are, please, Doctor."

"Your daughter is very dangerously ill, Sir Charles," Weston answered as simply. "She very nearly went out this afternoon. She has no physique, no stamina, you see— On the other hand, she is very young, and, fortunately for her, she can have any climate, any mode of life, and treatment, Sir Philip Jackson—who can't be beaten as a heart specialist—may recommend. Mr. Quintana is devoted to her—so are you—and Lady Grace—so, *if* she recovers from this attack, and other things being equal, I see no real reason why she *shouldn't* live for many years, only——"

"Thank God!"

"Just so. But you must remember, she is by no means safe yet. And I must warn you, as I shall warn Mr. Quintana to-morrow, that if—as I sincerely hope, she does get over this, she must not have—cannot stand—any worries of any kind. She cannot stand emotional upsets, troubles, even discussions—arguments. And I am sure that this attack has been brought on less by the fatigue of the journey down than by some mental crisis. And if she is to have mental crises, Sir Charles," ended the plain, shabby little man, with quiet conviction, "she—will *not* live."

"I see. And you are perfectly right. She has been—extremely unhappy, Doctor, and it's my fault—the worry—I mean. I—I've behaved like a fool, and it *has* made her horribly unhappy——"

The doctor smiled, full of liking for the huge, childish

man, and held out his hand. "Then don't," he answered. "Make her happy instead!"

"I will. If I possibly can," said Beville humbly, "I will."

Then the doctor went down to where Bob was waiting for him, and Beville sat down by the fire and closed his eyes.

.

Never in his life had Charles Beville been so tired; he was so tired that it seemed to him that every square inch of his great surface was torn by a separate pain; the small of his back seemed hollow, as if several vertebræ were missing; and his head felt empty, yet tightly squeezed, as if in a press.

He had not been ill for a quarter of a century, and though he did not know it, his long immunity had made him forget how to meet bodily infirmity.

For a long time he was numb with fatigue and misery, and then slowly his mind began to work again, and a fresh wave of anguish swept over him.

Violet was going to die. The doctor had tried to cheer him up, but he knew. She was dying. 'And by God, Bob'll want to—to bury her *here*, far away from all her own people—' . . . Oh, yes, she was going to die. He knew. . . . An hour or two ago and he had felt that it would relieve him to open his mouth and bellow, like an animal, but he no longer wanted to bellow. He wanted to die, too. 'I don't want to live,' he thought, 'if Violet dies, and if I die, Gracie won't care——'

There Gracie sat in the picture, in the familiar old blue velvet dress with the mended lace "berthe", her knitting-needles glinting in the firelight, just as he had been seeing her, it seemed to him now, all his life. His Gracie. His wife. . . . He was her husband, and he had made her go to bed, and he was to call her when—if—the nurse told him to. *He* was to call her, as was right and proper;

not Vincent. His animosity against Vincent had gone; he pitied his poor little friend; he loved him. And to-morrow—when less tired—he would make up with Bob. He pitied Bob. ‘He hates me,’ he reflected drearily, but without sharpness of sensation, ‘because it is me that has killed Violet——’

It was dawn, a crystalline after-spring-rain dawn, when the nurse opened the door of the sitting-room. The sun lay like a pale strip of cloth-of-gold on the grass under the windows, but it had not yet penetrated the room, where night still ruled.

The fire was out, but an electric lamp on a far table still burned, and a faint red still gleamed under the ashes in the hearth.

And there in his big chair slept the big, worn man, one cheek pillowed on his big brown right hand.

The nurse looked at him sorrowfully for a moment, and then her quiet voice waked him.

“Sir Charles—Sir Charles,” she said, “Mrs. Quintana wants to see you——”

Jumping to his feet all in one moment, he stood staring at her from the webs of new wrinkles round his eyes. “Then she’s—better?”

If she was better, she was going to get well!

“She is—perhaps—a little better,” the nurse returned, “but you must not speak one word to her. Dr. Weston forbade me to let anyone but Mr. Quintana——”

“Pooh,” interrupted Beville, with a large gesture of disdain, “Mr. *Quintana*! I’m her *father*, Nurse——”

She did not smile, for she had often met such arguments from one generation, one relationship, to another. “I know, Sir Charles, I know,” she agreed; “that’s why I am using my own judgment and letting you go in for just one moment. Come, will you?”

As soft-footed as she herself, he followed her, his scant, curly hair ruffled and untidy, his mouth a straight line.

"Here is Sir Charles, Mrs. Quintana——"

He stood still for a moment, his baseless tide of hope ebbing. He would not have known Violet, so unearthly, so remote did she look.

Without speaking he knelt by the bed and bent over her, and presently he felt on his cheek the faintest of cold touches, and as it fell he took her hand, smoothed it between his, and kissed it.

In this room was an eastern window, and the early sun began to strengthen against its open square as he knelt there. Violet's eyes, eyes full of a solemn and terrible new wisdom, opened slowly, and met his, and on bending nearer he just managed to hear her whisper: "So glad—dear——"

It seemed to him a long time before he rose, but it was not more than two minutes, and the nurse's eyes approved him as he quietly left the room.

"What a nice man," she reflected, "so calm—unlike that poor boy the husband—but how tired he looks——"

When Quintana crept into the bedroom a moment later, and she went to her own room to make herself a cup of tea, she carried a cup into the sitting-room.

Charles Beville was sitting by the fire, crying, and when she made to leave without speaking to him, he called her back.

"Come, in Nurse," he said, rising but not making any attempt to dry his eyes—such queer, beautiful, three-cornered eyes, she thought. "That's awfully kind of you," he said; "I've been trying to say my prayers, and I'm—er—I can't remember beyond 'Thy kingdom come'. How does it go on?"

She told him, and as he wiped his eyes he nodded like an attentive child. "Of course, of course——" Then, blowing his nose with muffled sonority, he took his teacup. "Ever hear of the man," he went on, "who asked who wrote the beautiful prayer beginning 'Our Father who art in Heaven'? Ha, ha!" His laughter, soft as it was, and

nervous though she knew it to be, surprised the nurse, for all her experience.

'How queer people are,' she reflected, a few minutes later, as she lay relaxed in her bath. 'He's broken-hearted if ever I saw a broken-hearted man—his nerves are in shreds—a great beefy man like him, too. . . . I hope I didn't cheer him up too much, for that poor girl . . . I'm glad Sir Philip is coming. . . . What a queer, simple creature the father is, crying like a child before me, and telling me he'd been "saying his prayers", too. . . . I wonder if Gerald would suffer like that if I was going to die——'

.

Meantime, unwarrantably cheered by the kind woman's cautious and reluctant words of encouragement, Beville sat on the window-sill overlooking the drive, and watched the lovely coming of the spring morning.

'She said that her sleeping was a good sign,' he thought, 'and that her pulse is a tiny bit stronger— And she's so young, too, Violet is. That's on her side, too——'

The scent of lilac rose in the still air, and he saw that the grass was a-sparkle with dew. The sky was gathering blueness, and a blackbird was piping on his woodland flute— 'Oh, God,' prayed Beville, not knowing that he prayed, '*please* let her get well. *Please* do——'

Perhaps all real prayers are as unconscious and as childish. A moment later he padded down the passage to Lady Grace's room, and he did not see another door open an inch or two, as he passed it to open hers. He was going to tell his wife that their child was a little better, and that it was time for her, his wife, to get up.

Without knocking, he went into the dark room, and spoke to her.

"Are you awake, dear?"

"Oh——" she cried sharply. "Oh, it's *you*! Yes, Charles, I've just waked. How—how is she?"

"She's better. Not much, but a little, thank God. She's having a splendid sleep——"

In the confusion of his so early arrival, his dressing-case had been brought to his wife's room, and having discovered it, he now began to unpack, throwing things out as a burrowing animal throws earth. She sat up in bed, haggard and old in the gathering daylight, staring at him in amazement. Had he utterly forgotten, she wondered? Here he was, simply being a hurried, untidy husband, perfectly at home in his wife's room. What a man!

"Coney was out when I got back to the house," he explained casually, "so I had John pack, and John's an idiot. Where in Heaven's name *is* that damned razor? . . . Oh, here it is. My own fault entirely——"

Rising, he gathered up an armful of clothes of all kinds, and turned to the bed. "Where's the nearest bathroom?" he asked.

"Two doors down to the left. I—I'll get up now. Oh, Charles," faltered the poor woman, "it has been so terrible! *Is she really* better, do you think?"

"Well, Gracie," he replied slowly, "she looks—dreadful, but she knew me. She—she t-ried to smile. *H'm!* The doctor told me that she is a *little* stronger, and the nurse—such a nice girl, the nurse, with a dimple in her chin!—says her pulse is a tiny bit better. So—cheer up, dear! We mustn't lose heart, you know, and *I* am feeling much more hopeful——"

Lady Grace gazed at him with a mixture of heartbreak and unwilling amusement in her red-rimmed, haggard eyes, as he stood there hugging a mass of clothes, sponges, and brushes in his unaccustomed arms.

"Why didn't you bring Coney?" she asked.

"I told you—he was out. Shall I draw your bath after mine?"

"No, thanks. I've a bathroom here."

"Right you are. Well—so-long, darling. You'll feel better," he added as he opened the door, "when you've

had your tea. Oh, here *is* Isabella. Good morning, Isabella——”

In the passage he met Lundy, in his shabby old dressing-gown, coming back from his bath, and at the sight of him the Frenchman stood still, stiffening like a pointing dog. “Oh, Vincent,” burst out Beville innocently, “I’ve *seen* her! She sent for me!”

Lundy glared furiously out of his thicket of uncombed hair and beard. “*Sent* for you,” he repeated, his voice a hoarse growl, “what d’you mean? Why in God’s name did she send for *you*?”

Beville stared at him stupidly for a moment, and then his lined, thinned face brightened up irrepressibly. “Oh, you old donkey,” he cried in the friendliest way in the world, “I don’t mean Gracie, I mean Violet!”

“*Humph!*” And the Frenchman, with an irascible scowl, went his way.

‘My God,’ Beville thought, as he shaved, ‘to think of old Vincent being jealous of me about Gracie. My own wife! After all,’ he pursued, “French people really *haven’t* got our English sense of honour——’

That was a very long day, and to Beville it seemed interminable.

Before he had finished his breakfast, Sir Philip Jackson arrived, and when he had seen his patient, the great specialist was sent with Beville to the dining-room for some food.

For a few moments Beville, as acting-host, busied himself providing the guest with what he wanted, and then after a few moments he could wait no longer.

“And now, Sir Philip,” he asked resolutely, “will you please tell me exactly what is the matter with my daughter, and—what you think about her—her chances of recovery? I am very fond of her, and I want to know the—the whole truth.”

“You shall have it, Sir Charles, so far as I can tell it to you——”

And after a few technical particulars, which he made as simple as possible, the great doctor went on: "Mrs. Quintana has been desperately ill, Sir Charles, and I must not conceal from you that she is still in great danger. She is one of the most delicate people I have ever come across in the course of many years of practice. If I had known her before, I would have forbidden her to have a child for several years, and as it is—if she recovers from this acute attack—she must never have another. And she must live in the most perfect quiet and peace of——"

Beville drew a deep breath. "Then," he broke in, "she *is* going to live! Thank God, thank God——"

Sir Philip held up an authoritative hand. "One moment, please. In cases such as Mrs. Quintana's no human being could state so soon, and as a fact, that the patient is going to—to recover. I have given her a subcutaneous injection of a new and extremely powerful German product, and she *seems* to be reacting to it, but—it is my duty to repeat that she is still dangerously ill, Sir Charles."

Beville stared at him, something inimical in the set of his jaw.

"You said 'she must live quietly'," he quoted obstinately. "Well, Sir Philip, she shall. She can go anywhere, in any way, for any length of time, for fortunately Quintana is a rich man, and—so am I——"

"Most fortunate! But, as I was about to say, what is even more important to Mrs. Quintana than physical surroundings is—mental quiet. I cannot too strongly impress upon you—upon everyone—that trouble of any kind, worry, or even unpleasant preoccupations, would most probably prove fatal to her. I have now explained as best I can, how matters stand, and I must go back to her, if you'll excuse me——"

Left alone, Beville sat for a few moments in the beautiful linen-fold panelled dining-room, and then went upstairs.

On the landing he met Lady Grace. "Oh, Charles,"

she broke out, a faint flush in her haggard face, "Sir Philip says she is really a little stronger! Oh, thank God! That German medicine—" She began to cry quietly, without concealment.

"Yes, indeed, thank God, Gracie; I'm sure she'll be all right now—" Absent-mindedly he bent and kissed her cheek, and neither he nor she noticed what he had done. "Poor old girl," he went on kindly, "it's been dreadful for you, too——"

"It has, Charles. You've no idea. But—she even *looks* a little better now. Sir Philip let me go in for a moment, and she—she tried to smile at me——"

Her voice broke, and he patted her back with a hand that shook a little.

"I— They want her to sleep now," he said. "Sir Philip told me. So I'm going for a walk. I—I want to do some thinking."

Something in his voice startled her. "Yes," she agreed quietly, "we must all do that. Bob says that if— Oh, Charles!—he'll take a yacht for the summer . . ."

'A yacht. Yes, that's a good idea,' Beville thought, as he tramped across the flat green country-side. "They could cruise about in the *Ægean* for a while, and then work up to Scandinavia for the hot months. And Bob must let me share the expenses. Poor young devil, I'll forget all about his queer rudeness to me! After all, it's natural for him to hate me, since it's me who made her ill. And I suppose he really does love her as much as I do, though it doesn't seem possible. Why, he's only known her a few months, and I'm her *father*——'

The acute agony of the drive down, and last night's hopelessness, had dulled his mind, as the nurse had seen, but he was a very strong man, sound as a bell physically, and his bath, his breakfast, and, above all, his talk with the specialist, had now restored him.

His slow mind, as he walked, was working with what in him was unusual alertness and clarity.

'Please God,' he told himself, 'she *is* going to get over this. Oh, God, you *will* make her get well, won't you? And that—*she*—is the only thing that matters. Gracie and I don't matter, poor old Vincent doesn't count, *nothing* counts except Violet. So Gracie mustn't divorce me, Vincent must go away for a while, and I—must be good. I'll chuck every one of those damn women, I won't go anywhere. I'll just stay at home and look after Gracie. My wife. *Poor* old Gracie! My God, how ill she looks! She looked a million years old last night, but once she sees that she can trust me—and she *can* trust me—I've learnt my lesson—she'll be all right. And I'll make her happy, and she won't give Vincent another thought. I'll try to buck up, too, and not be such a noodle. I'll read some of her books—wonder what I did with that one about the lighthouse?—Virginia somebody's—that she likes so much—and we'll go to some concerts together. After all, I'm not a perfect fool, and I *do* like Tchaikovsky—and Grieg. Why, I *love* Greig——'

The morning was a delicious one, all the young leaves freshly lacquered by the rain, the air full of heartening smells of richness and growth, and as he walked, his spirits rose still further.

'She *is* going to get well,' he repeated to himself as he picked some primroses to give her. 'She was all right after the baby was born. Doing well, she was, till she got so upset and excited about the divorce. Oh, what a swine I am! . . . Though, after all, rotten though I've been, I really don't think I can be blamed *altogether* for a divorce I never wanted! . . . She'll love these primroses. . . . Well, there won't *be* a divorce, and Gracie and I will just settle down into a nice, happy old Darby and Joan. High time I *did* settle down, too,' he concluded virtuously. 'I'll own up again to Gracie that I have played the fool, and I'll apologize again, too. Oh, yes, I'll crawl thoroughly—so *that'll* be all right. . . . And as to poor Vincent, I'm damned sorry for him, for he's the best fellow that ever

lived. Only—' he had reached the Saucer Hall gates, and was walking across the lawn to avoid making a noise on the gravel—he had no business to fall in love with another man's wife! Why, it's even in the Commandments! "Thou shalt not covet——"'

.

For three endless days Violet Quintana hung between life and death.

Sir Philip Jackson came down every morning, arriving in time for a late breakfast, and Dr. Weston made the Hall his headquarters. Another nurse had arrived, and in the greatest quiet the struggle with death went on in the beautiful old house.

Quintana spoke to no one, and spent hours seated, out of sight of the bed, in his wife's room. Lady Grace, always the most silently moving of women, went in and out as she was allowed, and Beville spent most of his time in his daughter's sitting-room, waiting for news.

He and Lundy had their meals together, but the Frenchman rarely spoke. He looked desperately haggard, and his beard had new grey streaks in it, but when Beville once asked him how he felt, he nearly snarled at him. "*Je me porte,*" he answered with a sardonic grin like a rictus, "*à merveille——*"

This attitude bewildered and depressed Beville, who, in his deep preoccupation with Violet, forgot, for hours at a time, his grudge against his old friend, but he made no attempt at a rapprochement, or at an explanation.

The evening when Violet was definitely pronounced out of danger, the explanation came: was forced on him by Lundy.

Charles had been allowed in to see Violet for a moment, and came down to dinner walking on air. Violet was going to live, which to him meant that she was going to get well, that everything was going to be all right; that God was indisputably in His Heaven.

Nothing had been said to him about Lady Grace's meals, and he had asked no questions, taking her eating upstairs for granted, and not inquiring, even of himself, whether she did so to avoid meeting Lundy and him together.

So for three days the two men had breakfasted, lunched, and dined together, and little by little Lundy's grumpy unresponsiveness silenced Beville, who, finally, began to feel badly treated and, once more, retrospectively more or less justified.

If Vincent behaved like that to him, he dimly felt, when he was amiable and forgiving, then Vincent must be more blameable than he was.

This last mess, at least, the mess with Quincy Paul and that brat of a boy, would most certainly never have happened if Vincent's bad influence hadn't made Gracie be so beastly to him. It was all very well for Gracie to say that she would have divorced him even if Vincent had not existed, but he knew better; all bunk, that was. Gracie wasn't the kind of woman to do such a thing off her own bat. Vincent had egged her on; the divorce was in reality Vincent's doing; Vincent's fault.

'And he'll tell that priest of his,' Beville's thoughts went as he ate his dinner that evening when Violet was for the first time safe, 'and the priest'll make him say some extra prayers, and then he'll forgive him, and Vincent will be a white woolly lamb!'

"—Charles," said Vincent suddenly, in his deepest, hollowest voice, when the servants had left them alone with their fruit, "I'm going back to-night, by the ten-ten train. And before I go I must tell you something."

"Fire away," Beville replied, carefully peeling his peach. 'And I've got something to tell *you*, too,' he thought. . . .

"It's this, then," began Lundy, setting down his glass and wiping his pale lips; "Violet's illness—or rather, what those doctors have told us about this—this serious constitutional weakness of hers, has—changed things. You know how much I love Violet—not," he added bitterly, "that

it seems to matter much whom *I* love! But I'll not go into that. All I want is to make you understand that because of Violet——"

He paused. "If it weren't for Violet, Beville, I'd have married Gracie. Nothing in the world, or out of it, could have stopped me. Nothing. I'd have married her, or I'd have died. But as it is—I'm beaten. I give in."

Beville was about to speak, but with a gesture the Frenchman bade him be silent.

"Wait. I've given in, and I've told Gracie so, and she understands. And what is more," he went on, his face ghastly and stern, "we both understand that for Violet's sake you and she must stay together."

"Of course we——"

"Oh, for God's sake be quiet, will you, and let me finish! Gracie is going to—to forgive you and take you back. And I—I'm leaving England to-morrow." He rose, tossing his crumpled napkin on to the table. "I'm leaving England," he repeated, "and I'm not coming back. That," he added, "is all I've got to say. Good-bye, Charles."

Beville sprang to his feet. "But, my dear old man," he bungled, deeply in earnest, "you can't go away like this! Why, Gracie and I should miss you horribly! Wait a minute, Vincent. Of course she mustn't divorce me—that was all nonsense, anyhow——"

"It *wasn't* nonsense, you thick-headed fool— *Et remarquez-bien ceci*. I am beaten *only* by Violet. Not by you."

Beville looked down at him, his eyes kind. "Right you are," he said soothingly, "have it your own way, Vincent. I'm sorry you can't be sensible, but you must do as you like. But as to—my wife and myself—we'd stick it out for Violet's sake even if we hated each other, which we don't. As a matter of fact," he added, "I'm very fond of Gracie."

"*Oh, Dieu!*" breathed the Frenchman, with a mixture

of bitter amusement and pain, "‘fond of Gracie’, are you?"

"Yes, I am," Beville retorted, stoutly. "And—even if you hadn't said a word, Vincent, I was going to speak to you about it. I was going to tell *you* that there mustn't be a divorce, and that we must all three stop thinking of ourselves. This," he added, "is no time for selfishness. We must think of *Violet*."

Lundy broke into a cracked laugh, and tried to speak, but Beville would not let him.

"There was another thing I meant to tell you again, Vincent, and it's this. I have treated Gracie horribly, and—I'm sorry. I—I've been thinking a lot, these last few days, and I understand better than I ever did before. And—never again, so long as I live, am I going to do one single thing to hurt her. Not one single thing. So there!"

Lundy groaned aloud. "I see," he murmured, "I see. Well—please God you mean all that. No—I *know* you mean it. Please God, though, that you can keep your word, Charles——"

Beville held out his hand, and after a pause the other man took it, and they stood gazing at each other for a long moment.

"I will keep my word, Vincent," Beville declared slowly, "so help me God, I will."

It was, Lundy reflected as, without further private talk with Beville, he sped towards the station in Quintana's car, the height of irony that never had he so liked, so respected, his old friend as now, when, hating him, he had left him.

CHAPTER TEN

BEVILLE had planned to have a straight talk with his wife the next day, and another with his son-in-law, but these talks somehow never came off. As to Quintana, in his relief over his wife's safety, his surliness towards his father-in-law gave way to an unheralded, unexplained change of manner; he did not like his father-in-law, whom in his youthful intolerance he naturally regarded as both more wicked and stupider than he really was, but, when all was said and done, Beville was nothing to him, so why not be ordinarily civil to him? Besides, what did *anything* matter, now that Violet was going to get well!

So henceforth, during the twenty-four hours after Lundy's leaving, the young man took some pains to be agreeable to his unwelcome guest, and Beville was far too good-natured and unresentful to hold back, or to force an explanation that now seemed unnecessary. 'He can't dislike me so much, after all,' he told himself, 'or he wouldn't be so nice to me. And he's really a *very* nice boy—' And he was satisfied.

As to Gracie, he made various attempts to tell her of his resolution, but she evaded him in a way against which no reasonable protest could be made, so after one or two abortive efforts to have his talk with her, he ended by serenely accepting what he believed to be the situation; that she understood without words.

'She's completely done in,' he reflected kindly, 'and she doesn't feel up to any talk, so I mustn't pester her. I apologized good and plenty at the studio, anyway, and besides, I'll be coming down in a day or two. From now on,' he concluded, quite innocently self-righteous, 'I'm going to *take care* of Gracie——'

Then, on the morning of his departure, Lady Grace tapped on his door as he was dressing.

"Violet wants to see you, Charles," she said quietly, "can you come?"

Resplendent in the gay dressing-gown that Coney had brought down to him, his hair still damp, and curling like little feathers over his gradually heightening forehead, he went to the sick-room.

Violet, who for the first time since her illness had her baby beside her bed, smiled at him. "Mother says you are going home," she whispered. "Coming again soon?"

"Bob says I may come whenever you want me— You're looking *beautiful*, darling."

"Lovely woman." She closed her eyes for a moment while he gently stroked her hand, and then she went on slowly, and in the faintest of voices: "Father—mother has told me about you and her, and I'm so happy——"

He nodded. "Yes, it's splendid, isn't it?"

"Splendid. She—I think she's wonderful——"

He nodded. "Of course she is. And—" He had little time, so he went on briefly: "Violet—you must forget all—all those bad things I did. I've been an awful swine, but you mustn't ever think of it again, will you?"

Her thin fingers pressed his a little. "Forget it all," she answered. "Kiss me, darling."

He kissed her very gently. "Poor father—you have wrinkles now. *Real* ones!"

"Yes. I—I've been punished, you know. I deserved it, but I got it! And, Violet—" he kissed her again, "I want you to understand one thing: I—I'm going to be different in the future, very different. You'll see, old girl! I'm going to make Gracie the happiest woman in England——"

"I'm sure you will, darling—" Her eyes closed again, and she did not reopen them, but on her wasted little face he saw before he left her a look of great peace and hope.

And as he went down to breakfast his wife waylaid him.

"Charles," she said gravely, "we needn't talk about—things, and of course I know that Vincent told you what we have decided, but I want to tell you myself that I *am* willing—for Violet's sake—and that I'll do my best."

It seemed to him, so much slighter-souled, so much more spontaneous than she, a rather meagre acknowledgment, but he only nodded. "I understand, Gracie," he said, "and—I'm going to do *my* very best, too. Try to forgive me if you can, for I'm sincerely sorry I've so hurt you. And," he swallowed like an embarrassed child, "I'm going to be quite different. You'll see——"

.

He began his reformation at once, for, like many easy-going devotees of the line of least resistance, when he did make up his mind to any activity, he let no grass grow under his feet.

Lady Grace, on Quintana's very urgent invitation, was to stay on at Saucers for an indefinite time, and though Beville was a little inclined to be aggrieved at being practically sent home, and at having to live alone in his big house, he realized that her absence would make things much easier for her! 'By the time she gets back,' he reflected sagely, 'everyone will know the divorce is off, and the talk will have died down! Not,' and at the thought he involuntarily gave a little chuckle, 'that anyone would dare in any circumstances to mention it to *her*. Lord, how she'd wither anyone who had the cheek to do it!

'And now for me to clear my own decks for action——'

He dined at his club that night, and took occasion to inform various well-tested scandal-spreaders that in his case there was nothing to spread.

Then, luckily finding two temporary grass-widowers in the smoking-room after dinner—Lord Benchester and Carstairs—he told them the news.

"Everything's *quite* all right," he declared, smiling from ear to ear. "I've played the fool a bit, you know, but Gracie's been an angel and forgiven me, and henceforth, you two old sinners, mine is to be a Blameless Life!"

"*H'm!*" was Benchester's sole comment, and Carstairs shook his head in commiseration. "I know exactly how you feel, old man," he said. "I felt just the same that time Eva caught me out——"

"No, you didn't, old boy. Not by a long chalk you didn't! Eva gave you hell, and you were in a most horrible funk, whereas Gracie has never even said an unkind word to me! Just *forgave* me, and that's that. She's been wonderful, Gracie has——"

Then he walked home and devoted several hours to writing letters.

He wrote to Lady Manisty, to Mrs. Paull, and to Drusilla Battle.

It was easy enough to tell Edith the news, because Edith, he reflected, was so fond of Gracie, and so like her. Edith, he had no doubt, would really be glad that he and Gracie had made up. By Jove, what a fine woman Edith was! And how beautifully she made up. 'I'll try to get Gracie to darken her lashes just a *very* little——'

He dreaded writing to Quincy Paull, but he thanked God that Gracie had forgiven him in the nick of time. 'Of course,' his thoughts ran on, 'it *wasn't* a put-up job, that boy coming in just then, but she certainly made good use of it. Lord, wasn't I in a funk just before Vincent rang up——!'

As to Miss Battle, he was terrified when he faced the thought of her. For not only was she violently in love with him, but he quite realized that her drinking and drugging had affected, if not her brain, at least her nervous system and her self-control.

'She's just the kind to shoot a fellow, or throw vitriol over his wife! God, what a completely bloody fool I am. Or have been, I mean——'

He sat there in the beautiful old library, his unbeautiful old pets at his feet, whisky-and-soda at his side, a well-stocked Florentine leather stationery-case before him, his pen in his hand, for over half an hour before he actually began to write.

But when, two hours later, Domenico came in to see if he wanted anything more, the waste-paper basket was full of carelessly crumpled half-written sheets, and two envelopes lay, already addressed, on the table.

"Oh, it's you, you old scoundrel," the writer cried, throwing down his pen. "Been making Isabella jealous lately? I noticed a very pretty new young housemaid yesterday——"

The old man smiled with courtesy. "*Nossignore*," he replied. "I am very old now——"

Beville studied his face for a moment.

"Just how old *are* you, Domenico?" he asked.

"I am nearly sixty-one, Sir Charles."

"But that's not old! Not *really*! Why, I'm fifty-two myself, and I don't mean to be an old man in eight years——"

The thought surprised and aggrieved him. He had forgotten what Violet had written to him about "old men".

"We Italians age earlier than the English, *Signore*. That is because we—*h'm!*—grow up earlier. Me, Sir Charles, speaking with respect, I was a father when I was seventeen."

"Were you, indeed!"

"I was, sir. My son is now forty-four years old. He is a priest in Gubbio, in Umbria. A saintly man——"

"I see. Well, old friend, I shan't need you again, so good night. *Duorma bene*——"

"The same to you, Sir Charles. *Buonissimo riposo, Signore*——"

Beville sat for a few minutes staring into space. Then he thought: 'By Jove, I must go and see Dora. It's over

two years since I've been near her. I wonder how they are——'

And he sighed, and returned to his letter to Miss Battle.

.

The next morning his three letters reached their destinations.

Lady Manisty, after a sleepless night, was sitting by her fire in a dressing-gown, eating breakfast, when her post arrived, and it was Beville's envelope that she opened first. "Dear Edith" [he had written], "Gracie has forgiven me, and we are going to begin over. Isn't it splendid of her? I've not forgotten our last talk, my dear, and I know you will be glad for both Gracie and me. Violet came within an ace of dying the other day, and was in terrible danger for three days more, but now she is safe, thank God, and as happy as a bird.

"I shall be coming to see you soon, dear Edith, and I am as always—your affectionate CHARLES BEVILLE."

"So," the lonely woman murmured in her safe solitude, "Eleonor Percival *was* right! Oh, dear. I must try to be glad. I *will* be glad——"

She loved Beville, but it was against her will, and deeply against her conscience, for she loved his wife, too, so presently she had pulled herself together and rang for her maid.

"I'm going down to Hove for a few days, Esther," she said quietly, "to try to get over this horrid cold——"

"Yes, my lady," agreed the maid, who loved her. So Edith Manisty went to Hove.

.

Mrs. Paull waked very late that morning in her beautiful Chinese Chippendale room, and as she drank orange-juice and black coffee she read *her* letter from the man she had determined to marry.

"Dear Quincy" [Beville's large, rather boyish writing

said to her], "I hope you got my message all right the other night? My daughter was desperately ill, and I hadn't a moment to lose, so I couldn't go back to the studio. Lundy joined me at St. James's Place, and we were off in my car within half an hour of my leaving you. It was a terrible drive, and we had three terrible days at my son-in-law's place. The doctors gave us very little hope, and it was dreadful. I shall never forget it. You know how my wife and I adore Violet, so you'll understand. Thank God she's safe now. I know you'll be glad, my dear. And I want you to be one of the first of my friends to know that my wife and I have decided to begin over again. Buried the tomahawk, as you'd say, only God knows I had no tomahawk for her! It was entirely and *only* my own fault. I can't tell you how happy I am about it all, and how grateful to my wife.

"My kindest regards, dear lady" [the letter ended], "and all the best. Yours ever, CHARLES."

Mrs. Paul's sallow face seemed to turn yellower as she read, and she swore softly when she had finished. "Damn and blast! What rotten luck! . . . Still, he's a dull old thing, when all's said and done, and the sea isn't empty of fish yet——"

Thus easily comes philosophy when the feelings are not engaged.

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When the feelings are engaged it is indeed, to use an Italian phrase, another pair of sleeves.

For two hours after reading her letter from Charles Beville, Drusilla Battle cried, and screamed, and fell from one near-fainting-fit into another.

She had been taking a good deal of cocaine since she had last seen the writer of the letter, and still more champagne, and her nerves were already in ribbons, so the letter was the last of many straws, and it broke her. It is odd that while what was worst in the girl was what at times,

and against his will, but strongly, appealed to the man, it was his fundamental decency, his good side, that made its appeal to the unhappy and noxious little degenerate.

And now she was bewailing the loss not of a rich and generous lover, and a possible husband; but of something infinitely more; she was intelligent, and she knew that in losing Beville she was losing her last hope of redemption; that she was done for.

"Mademoiselle," observed her maid, between sympathy and scorn, "was very bad last night; mademoiselle should take better care of herself or she'll lose her looks——"

"Oh, shut up, Madeleine! *Fiche-moi la paix*. I wish I was dead. What," she added frantically, "have I got to live for? Not a damn thing, and you know it——"

More than ever like the big-eyed little African animal did she look, now that her golden ball of hair was dishevelled and shapeless, her eyes swollen and bulging with tears, and when she had again thrown herself on the floor in a paroxysm of hysteria, the maid went quietly to the downstairs telephone and rang up Basil Freeth, who presently came round to see what he could do.

Freeth was a very slim young man with a distinct waist, and the offensively mincing manner of his kind—for he was really what Bertie Stanton only appeared to be—but he had the most affectionate of hearts, and was, in his odd way, devoted to the little actress.

Laying his beautiful hat and his exquisite gloves on a Venetian wedding-chest in the passage, he went upstairs and, without knocking, into Drusilla's room.

"*C'est la garril-Friend*," commented Madeleine to Beech, the parlourmaid, with a shrug. "All the tastes are in nature——"

When Freeth came in, Drusilla did not stir. "Who's that?" she asked in a fretful, high voice. "Whoever you are, please go away——"

"It's only me, darling; only Basil. You don't mind *me*, you know you don't——"

She did not. On hearing his voice she turned over, and sat up, shook her tear-wet hair, and opened her eyes.

"Oh, darling," she whimpered, "there isn't going to be a divorce! Isn't it too foul?"

"Beville, you mean? I don't believe it. Why, he told you himself, Dru!"

"Yes, he did, the b-beast. But I've just had a letter from him. There it is on the bed, you can read it——"

Sitting on the disordered bed he read the letter through twice. Then he shrugged his shoulders. "That's a darn shame, darling Dru," he said compassionately. "It's *horrid* for you. But of course he's miles too old for you. We all thought that from the beginning. You're so beautiful, and so *young*, angel——"

"I don't care if he's a *hundred*. I love him. I never loved anyone before in my whole life, and now I've lost him. I wish to God I was dead, Basil, that's what I wish——"

Basil Freeth seemed to Charles Beville, and most normal men and women, something like a horrible, revolting little freak, yet he was womanly tenderness and sweetness personified that April morning.

Like a sister he soothed the distracted, nearly insane girl; he washed her face and hands in cool, scented water, he brushed her hair into shape and finally he drew her bath, and waited in her bedroom, chatting through the half-open door, while she took it.

And when Madeleine had dressed her, all but a frock, he spent several minutes with pursed lips and drawn brows, choosing a *négligée* for her to put on.

"This silver-and-white would do, darling," he mused, "or no! This wild-rose with the Malines lace is better. Here you are——"

And presently he had her sitting in the studio, silent, brooding, tragic, but without tears, and free from hysterics.

"Your play's off next week, isn't it, angel?" he asked presently, lighting a cigarette.

"Yes, thank God. Oh, Basil, I'm so miserable——"

"I know you are, Dru, but you mustn't give way. You've got too much character to let yourself go phut on account of an *old man*. Why, my father's a year younger than old Muffin Beville!"

"I don't care if your father's older than God. I love Charles, and I—oh, Basil! If only you could *see* his wife. She looks like a—a camel. She's perfectly hideous!"

Freeth had seen Lady Grace, and he did not think her the least like a camel. In fact, he rather admired her quiet dignity, and her calm acceptance of middle-age, but he had too much womanly tact to say so.

"*Is she, darling?*" he answered. "Poor devil! But of course they've made up because of the girl, what's her name—Vivien, Violet— He'll be pretty sore, darling," he added guilefully, "at having to give *you* up——"

"He won't. He doesn't care a damn for me. He hates me, I know he does——"

That was not a merry day for Basil Freeth, but he stuck to his post as many a better man might not have done, and that night after her "show", their own particular little coterie took the bereft one on a consolatory spree.

They visited three dance-clubs, drank enough to put old-time, three-bottle men to shame, and ended up at a private opium-joint, where they stayed till broad daylight.

.

What would have happened had the old Duke of Ringborough, Grace Beville's uncle, not been taken dangerously ill early in May, it would be hard to say. For to Beville's incredulous surprise, his offer of a week-end at Saucers was politely but firmly refused by his son-in-law.

"She sends you her love, sir, and she is doing splendidly," came the young man's voice over the telephone, "but Sir Philip so insists on absolute quiet, that I am afraid——"

"But I'd be quiet, Bob! I'd be awfully quiet," protested Beville, humbly. "I shouldn't even *refer* to—anything upsetting, and I'm horribly anxious to see her——"

"I'm sure you are, sir, and of course she'd *like* to see you. But I'd really rather you didn't come quite yet, and so would Sir Philip. I'll let you know," Quintana added more cordially, "the minute it would do her *good* to see you— She sends you her love, did I tell you?"

"You did." There was a touch of huffiness in Beville's voice as he went on: "Well, it must be as you say, of course, but I can't understand why she can't see *her own father*! Very queer indeed, it seems to me. However," he added abruptly, "there's no more to be said. Good-bye." And he rang off. He hated being all alone in his house; he loathed not having Gracie knitting in her needle-point chair when he came in; he was bent on being good, and therefore kept away from most of his usual haunts. Carstairs and he lunched and dined together once or twice, but Carstairs was as inquisitive as a monkey, and wanted to know too much. Beville wished he had not confided in this old friend. "Eva and I," Carstairs would begin hopefully, and then he expected Beville to answer: "Gracie and I—" And Beville didn't. He just wouldn't. . . .

One evening he took Edith Manisty to Claridge's for dinner, and to a play about dead people—only they walked about, and talked exactly like living people, which puzzled and irritated him. 'One of these highbrow plays. Gracie would probably like it,' the bored man reflected. . . .

Edith, as usual, was delightful. She looked jolly handsome, too, in a new white satin dress with gold embroidery on it. A woman any man would be proud of being seen with.

And she asked no questions, and made no comments. Not one.

When he had entered her drawing-room she had given

him both her hands and said quietly: "I am very glad, Charles. Give my love to Gracie, won't you?" And that was all. *What* a dear she was! He enjoyed his evening very much, in spite of the play.

But the week-end that he had expected to spend at Saucers—showing Gracie and Violet what a completely changed man he was—was ghastly. He was bored to death.

Quincy Paull had sent, in answer to his letter, a very amusing note of congratulation, and at the end of it she asked him to motor down to Devon with her and a Colonel and Mrs. Maudesley, for Saturday and Sunday.

Colonel and Mrs. Maudesley were her most respectable friends. *Anyone* could go to Devon, even with Quincy, if Colonel and Mrs. Maudesley were of the party.

But he did not go. He did not go, and then he wondered whether Gracie would ever hear that he had refused the invitation?

"Turned it down cold; that's what I did," he thought with pride. He spent Sunday afternoon tramping across country in Hertfordshire, and dined alone at 74A, lonely but upheld by appreciation of his own commendability. And the next day he went to Hatchard's, and bought several pounds worth of the newest books. "I don't want rubbish, you know," he told the scholarly-looking man who served him. "They're not for *me*. My wife is very literary, and so is my daughter, and the books are for them. Biographies, you know, and Essays. Really *good* stuff——"

"I see, sir——"

"And just a few novels, too. That clever young man Huxley, for instance, and the man who wrote 'My Brother Jonathan', and—*h'm!*—there's a lady named Virginia something. She wrote a very fine book about a light-house——"

That scholarly salesman told his wife about his queer customer. "Sir Charles Beville is his name. An

immensely big, handsome, very well-dressed man he is. And yet, like a boy, somehow. He asked for the most astonishing books, too, and I'm sure his own reading is the daily papers, Wallace, and—" he named two or three popular women writers, each of whom have achieved great popularity by the nearness to downfall to which they bring their passionate, but at the eleventh hour triumphantly pure, heroes and heroines.

"A rather touching business it was, somehow——"

But Beville had not found it touching; he had thoroughly enjoyed his short swim in those unknown seas of superior literature, and he was convinced that Gracie and Violet would be much pleased with his sound and highbrow selections.

"They'll see I'm not such a hopeless nit-wit as they—at least Gracie—thinks I am," he reflected proudly, marching down Piccadilly in the sunshine.

"Hello, Muffin," cried a friend. "Where *you* going, prancing along like a drum-major?"

"Oh, go to hell," returned Beville good-humouredly. He was really happy that morning.

And then, before he had to face another week-end, the duke fell ill, and Quintana rang him up to tell him. "Lady Grace," the young man explained, "has just got off to Ringborough, and she asked me to ring you up, as she barely had time to catch the train."

"I see, Bob! What's the matter with the old man?"

"Pneumonia, I'm afraid. At any rate, Lady Olivia rang up and told her her uncle wanted to see her, and asked her to come prepared to stay for at least a week. I hope the duke'll be all right, sir. A charming old man, I thought——"

Then, as his father-in-law did not answer—could Quintana but have seen it, Beville was glaring haughtily at the wall over the telephone—the younger man went on. "Violet is much better to-day, Sir Charles. Sir Philip is delighted with her, so—I thought perhaps as she's so

well you—*er*—might care to come down for the week-end?"

For a moment Beville longed to fling back his invitation into his face. Did they think him such an ass as not to realize that he was being allowed—*allowed*—to come down now because Gracie had gone away? What the hell was the matter with everybody? He was to be *allowed* to come because Gracie was away!

This hateful idea had just that second come into his mind, but he knew that it was correct. Gracie hadn't written him a word in the nine days he'd been back in town, and now, in one of his surprising flashes of insight, he knew.

On the other hand—Violet—Violet would love to see him.

"Thanks, Bob," he said gently, "that's kind of you. I shall love to come."

"Good. Will you come by train? If so, a very good one leaves——"

"No, no. I'll run down in the car. I'll arrive about lunch-time on Saturday, if that suits you? Give Violet my love, will you?"

But all the rest of the week he was wondering; wondering why Gracie hadn't written; why she wouldn't let him come until now, when his coming would not mean her seeing him? 'Damn it, we *made up*, and everything was all right,' he brooded angrily. 'What the devil does she mean by all this?'

For a moment a vision of Lundy's tragic face stood before him, but with a frown he turned from it. Vincent was in France, but even if he were not, he would not be influencing Gracie. He had *agreed* that the reconciliation must be made, and though he had of course had no business to make love to his friend's wife, like that bounder in the Bible—the "forefront of the battle"—he wasn't the man to go back on his word. "I'm going to France," had been his words, "and I'm not coming back." So he hadn't come back.

Beville went into the drawing-room, and for a long time walked up and down there, trying to think. Gracie had told him she would try him again, and he had told Gracie he was going to be good; and he was being good. He had sent her a lovely lot of books—they must have got to Saucers two full days ago, and she hadn't thanked him for them! And he knew beyond the shadow of a doubt that it was her doing that he hadn't been allowed to come to Saucers last week-end. Was Gracie going to be grudging? If she was, there wasn't much good in their beginning over. 'Why on earth,' he thought angrily, 'can't she forgive and forget the way I do? Or as Edith has done!'

He was hurt and indignant, for he was of those happy people who, once they have forgiven, cannot but forget, but it should be noted that it never occurred to him that Gracie might be suffering because of having lost Vincent Lundy. Vincent was the best fellow in the world, but he was—just Vincent; small, frail, haggard. Old Vincent of the invisible hump. Gracie couldn't possibly be fretting over Vincent, when she had got her own husband back, and he was going to be so good——

'Well—I'll go up and see dear old Nanny,' he decided finally. 'She'll be glad I'm invited down, and she'll be sorry about Uncle Cyprian, too. Come along, Mrs. Tanq, you're looking quite handsome after your bath——'

Mrs. Lockett, not expecting distinguished company, was wearing her second-best dress—black merino, with small jet buttons down the front—and a cap at which Princess Mary of Teck would not have looked twice, but there was no doubt of her being glad to see Sir Charles.

"It is kind of you, sir," she exclaimed, making her rudimentary movement towards rising, and obeying his gesture and *not* rising, "to come again so soon. I've a message for you, too!"

"Have you, Nanny? I've come to tea, so I hope you've

got a decent cake. That one on Tuesday was horrid. Made of dried eggs, I'll wager——"

"Well, sir, it *wasn't*, but I didn't know you were coming, so it was just an everyday one——"

He rang, and Susan, the head housemaid, the old woman's niece, who looked after her, came in and made things ready.

"Who's your message from?" he asked, looking as interested as possible. No good doing anything by halves.

"Aha, sir! Well, I'll tell you. It's from her ladyship herself!"

"From her ladyship!"

Fumbling in her satin bag, the rather clumsy handiwork of Violet at fifteen, Nanny produced a letter and her glasses.

"It's a *long* letter, Sir Charles, with all the details about Violet, and then at the end she says—let me see. Oh, yes—I've written you such a lot, dear old Nanny, that I've no time to write to Sir Charles by this post, so will you give him a message from me? Tell him the books came yesterday afternoon, and have delighted us both. We thank him very much indeed. I am very much flattered and pleased that he remembered my liking for Mrs. Woolf's books, and Violet has taken the 'Uxley one, and the Life of Burns, and Brett Young's. I shall love the Life of——' *h'm*," added Mrs. Lockett, "I don't know how to pronounce it, I'm sure, sir. Geeth, or Gooth—or no, it must be Go-eeth. Foreign, I suppose?"

Beville nodded, pride in his mien. "Yes, it's a German poet. Wrote Faust, you know. I *knew* she'd like that! Two big volumes of it, there are——"

So everything was all right! She *had* liked the books.

"I'll write to him to-morrow," the old woman read on, as Susan brought in the tea, "and that's all, Sir Charles——"

Beville thoroughly enjoyed his tea. To-morrow he'd be having a letter from Gracie—"What a *fool* I was to get

the wind up!'—and on Saturday he'd see Violet. 'Oh, God, how glad I shall be to see her——'

He ate three big slabs of a horrible cake made in Yorkshire, with lard, by Susan's sister, and sent as a present to Nanny, and drank three cups of tea. And after tea he played two games of *béziq*ue with the beaming old woman. He was perfectly happy.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

ONE evening in the following November, Sir Charles Beville was sitting alone with his dog and his cat in the library at St. James's Place, reading *La Rôtisserie de la Reine Pédauque*.

He had enjoyed *Le Crime de Silvestre Bonnard*, but *La Rôtisserie* bored him, and as he felt a little drowsy after an excellent dinner, and as the pleasant, scented warmth of the fire inclined him to even greater lassitude, the book presently fell on Mrs. Tanq's undisturbed back, and Mrs. Tanq's master fell into a pleasant half-doze.

It was a wild night, raining and windy, and he liked hearing the sounds of the storm as he sat in comfort at home. His wife was dining in Manchester Square, but he had not been invited, for he and the old duke had not grown fonder of each other, and this was not a real party; just a small family gathering from which his absence would cause no comment.

Presently, his sleep becoming profounder, he began to dream; to dream about Vincent Lundy, and when his dog, growing uncomfortable, jumped with canine restlessness down from his uncomfortably relaxed knees, he waked with a start, his mind full of thoughts of his old friend.

It was seven months since he had heard a word of or from the Frenchman, and he knew that he had written to neither Lady Grace nor Violet.

'Where on earth can he be?' he reflected, lighting a cigarette. 'By God, I'd like to see old Vincent again! After all, we were good friends for all those years! Why, I *loved* the man, and he might have known I'd forget all about that nonsense of his over Gracie! . . . If he was here,' his thoughts ran on, 'he might be able to help me. And the Lord knows I could do with a little help—' He

had been yachting in the late summer, and done some shooting in Scotland, so his face was brown, but he had changed; he looked older and a little worn, and there was reason for this, for he was not happy.

'The last time I was really *happy*,' he reflected, 'was down at Saucers, after Grace went to Ringborough. Violet and I had a Heavenly time then, and Bob was nice to me, and I thought everything was going to be all right. . . . And then it wasn't. Damn it—' he rose uneasily, and stood looking into the fire. 'I don't say it was her fault—Gracie's, I mean—but it wasn't *all* mine, either. I was nice those two days here, when they were on their way to the yacht— So was she, of course, nice enough, and I thought everything would be all right when I got to Norway, and damn it, it wasn't, *there*, either! . . . Oh, damn!'

Just then the telephone rang and he went to it uninterestedly.

Taking up the receiver, he listened for a moment, his eyebrows climbed suddenly towards his receding hair, and then he let out a yell of delight.

"*You?*" he cried. "Is it *you*, you old devil? By God, Vincent, I'm glad to hear your voice! I've been thinking about you all the evening! Where are you?"

"I'm at old Banks's," returned Lundy, hoarsely. "I've been very ill, Charles—that's why I've come back—and I'm not much better even now. . . . Pneumonia it was. And—I thought I'd ring you up *pour le cas* that you might like to see me, after all——"

"Oh, be blowed to 'after all'! There isn't any 'after all'. Hop into a taxi and come here at once, will you? Gracie's at the duke's, so that we can have a good talk—not but what *she'll* be delighted to see you, too—" Suddenly remembering the circumstances of his and Lady Grace's last meeting with his old friend, and doubting the felicity of his remark, he went on in some confusion: "It's only half-past nine, so we can have a good old pow-wow

before she comes home—I've a thousand things to tell you, and to ask you, too——"

After a short pause and a quick cough, Lundy agreed to come, and Beville rang for Domenico and told him the news, and ordered drinks. "You might bring coffee, too," he added. "He *loves* coffee——"

When at last Lundy arrived, wearing his old caped-coat and a bulky woollen scarf, Beville was shocked by his air of illness, but tried to conceal it.

"By Jove, I'm glad to see you," he kept saying, and Lundy answered quietly, with a half-sardonic smile: "*Ma foi*, I believe you really *are*!"

The little man was thinner and more fragile-looking than ever, his beard, longer and wilder than before, had grown very grey, his eyes looked dim and large in their great hollows, and his high cheek-bones were scarlet.

"Pneumonia, you said? *H'm*—that's a beast of a business. Poor old Uncle Cyprian jolly near passed out with it last spring. But he's *very* well again, Vincent. *Perfectly* well, and so will you be, before long! Have a drink. You must," he went on, trying to conceal his alarm, "take that new kind of cod-liver oil and malt. That's what cured *him*——"

"It won't cure me," answered Lundy indifferently, as Beville piled wood on the fire and poked it, "my lungs were never up to much, you know, and—they're up to less now. But never mind me. Tell me about Violet. Is she quite well?"

"She's *splendid*, Violet is! They were yachting all summer, you know——"

"I know nothing, Charles——"

"Of course not—of course not. But they *were*. Yachting, I mean. Bob took Dick Musters's yacht—the *Seagull*—and they went to Greece and the Mediterranean, and then cruised about wherever they felt like going, for months. They went to Norway and Sweden in July, and I was with them all of August——"

"Good," murmured Lundy. "Good. And Gracie?"

His composure astonished Beville. Unlike old Vincent to speak so calmly about anything, and about *Gracie*—"It's a long time ago, though," he thought, as he refilled his glass, 'and I suppose he's getting over it.'

"Oh, Gracie's very well," he said. "She went with 'em, you know. The first of June that was, as soon as the doctors would let Violet move. They all spent two days here, on their way to Southampton, and we had a wonderful time! Violet *did* enjoy being at home again——"

Lundy's wasted face softened to an almost tender smile of amusement. Beville *would* go on considering his house, his married daughter's home!

"And Gracie enjoyed the yachting?" asked Lundy, suppressing a cough.

"Oh, yes, rather. His Ex had a yacht for years, you know, and she's always loved the sea. A wonderful sailor, Gracie is——"

"When does Violet come back to England?"

Beville's face changed. "Oh, not till the spring, I'm afraid. She's wonderfully better, but the doctors want her to avoid the English winter for several years— By God, Vincent," he added, openly plaintive, "I *do* miss her!"

"I'm sure you do. Are they in France now?"

"No. Algiers. Bob's taken a villa there. They've invited us out for Christmas——"

"You're going, of course?"

Beville hesitated, frowning a little, and his old friend and enemy noticed for the first time that he, too, had changed; he looked a trifle thin, and a trifle worn; his dimples were beginning to lengthen into wrinkles.

"To tell you the truth, Vincent," he burst out after that short silence, "I don't quite know *what* to do about going. I'd love to be with Violet and the baby, of course—you never *saw* such a baby in your life! A perfect beauty she is—and Violet's very keen on my coming, but——"

He frowned, as if he were gazing with his physical eyes at something that puzzled him.

"Go on," put in Lundy gently, and he went on.

"You see," he explained with a puzzled and unhappy frown, "I—I'm afraid Gracie'd rather go alone. Without me, I mean."

He had lifted his old cat to his knees as he spoke, and sat stroking her rhythmically. "Gracie and Violet," he added, "get on *awfully* well now. They always did, of course, but somehow Violet—I suppose because she's really grown-up now—seems fonder of Gracie than she used to be— They *love* being together——"

There was no shadow of any mean sentiment in his thoughtful face.

"I see," answered Lundy. "I'm glad, Charles, very glad indeed; and so are you, aren't you?"

"Of course I'm glad. . . . Only——"

He stopped stroking Flannel Rag, and sat frowning in silence for a moment, after which he set the cat down on the rug, lit a cigarette, and went on: "To tell you the truth, old man," he said, "I'm deuced glad you've come back, for I'm in a bit of a mess, and I've been missing you a lot. After all, you're my oldest friend, you know! Things haven't exactly turned out the way I—expected them to. And the funny part is that I don't know why they haven't."

"You mean—Gracie?"

"Yes. Of course, it was perfectly natural her being away with Violet all summer, and I was *glad* she was, though it was pretty lonely. And when I went out to the yacht she was awfully nice to me. Kind, you know, and gentle. Gentler than she'd been for a long time. And I did everything I could think of to please her."

"What a child he is," thought the Frenchman, once more face to face with the so strange fact that English men are eternally English boys. 'I'm sure you did, Charles,' he commented.

"Yes, I did. I listened to no end of her kind of music on that big gramophone-radio Bob bought for Violet—I got to like quite a lot of Beethoven, too. Quite *simple* music, really!—and I used to read aloud to her and Violet. They *enjoyed* that! Good stuff I read, you know, though I think that fellow—what's his name?—is rather too hard on poor old Queen Victoria. Oh, yes, it was *very* pleasant, and Gracie looked so well, too. Only——"

Suddenly he threw his freshly-lit cigarette into the fire and turning, faced his guest with a resolute look. "Do *you* think," he asked abruptly, "that a woman ever *really* forgives a husband like me?"

"Yes, I do. Women are wonderful. They *can* forgive things. The question is, Charles, whether you've given her time to *forget* as well?"

"But I didn't—don't—want her to forget, Vincent. I want her to *forgive* me, and that's different. I can forgive anything, and because I belong to the Bander-Log, I can't *help* forgetting. But she—Gracie—is different. And I tell you, old man, I've not been having the easiest time in the world."

"Poor Charles. But," Lundy asked, smiling affectionately, "what made you *expect* to have an easy time?"

"Oh, I know. I didn't deserve one. I quite realize that. Only—I did try my best."

Lundy was extremely sorry for the earnest, bewildered man. He knew that Charles really had done his best.

"I—I want," he began slowly, "to help, if I can, Charles. I have suffered a good deal in the last twenty-five years, and I, too, have done my best—most of the time. And now *le bon Dieu*—who always seems to me a little different from your adjectiveless 'God'—is being very kind to me. It no longer hurts me unbearably to think of you—and Gracie——"

"You mean," asked Beville simply, "that you don't love her any more?"

"Perhaps I mean that I now *really* love her. In any

case, I'm thinking less about myself and more about her. And you, too, old friend. I've thought a lot about you these last three months——"

"So've I, Vincent. I'm a stupid kind of silly ass, but I do think once in a while, and I've often wondered how you were. I—I was so sorry we quarrelled——"

Lundy nodded. "Yes, it was bad—but it hasn't really made any difference. Go on, Charles. Tell me all you really want me to know——"

"I don't think there's any more to tell, old man. Gracie is very kind to me, only—I'm lonely, somehow."

And there it was in a nutshell. He was lonely.

Lundy understood everything, even the things he had not been told, but before he had had to answer the avowal, Lady Grace came in.

She wore a, to him, new evening cloak of fur-trimmed black velvet, over a silver frock, and she looked very well, though indefinably older.

They met quietly enough, though she could not conceal surprise at his return, and the shock his aspect was to her.

"You have been ill," she cried, and if any echo of the old passion that had devoured him for so long still lingered in his spirit, it died quietly at the unqualified, sisterly friendliness of her voice.

"I am ill, Gracie," was his tranquil reply, "I'm very ill. That's why I have come back. I wanted to see you and Charles—again. And now Charles has been telling me about your summer with Violet, and I am so glad she's so much better——"

He was to die before Christmas, but nothing further was ever said between them of his brief time of hope and happiness. Except for that short period of revolt and possessiveness, he had been a most modest man, content with little, and it may perhaps be that in his weakness, the unclouded affection she could now give him, he was made in a way happy. At all events, he died with his hand in hers. . . .

"Violet is really better," she answered, "and I am sure that in time she will be nearly as strong as most people. She is very happy, Vincent. The baby is a little *love*—so pretty! And to Violet's delight she has Charles's dimples——"

It was only half-past ten, and for over an hour the odd trio sat by the fire, talking tranquilly, each wondering a little that one or the other of them could do so without embarrassment.

Lundy was, as always, thirsty for details about Violet and her daughter, and he was also quietly studying his companions. He was deeply sorry for them both.

Grace Beville was astonished that Lundy could endure such an evening, for as yet, shocked as she was by his looks, she did not realize how desperately ill he was, how illness had simplified things for him, but she was glad to see that he had lost all his bitterness, and his jealousy of Charles.

And Charles, desperately sorry for Vincent, wondered how Gracie could be so blind as not to see the alarming changes in the man she so short a time ago had meant to marry.

"Are you back in the studio?" Lady Grace asked presently, as she poured out her tea, and there was a short pause.

"No, Gracie," put in the ill-at-ease Beville, "he's at old Banks's in Clarges Street."

She looked up, her blue eyes full of disappointment. "But *why*, Vincent? Surely you won't give up the studio?"

"The studio, I'm afraid," was his matter-of-fact reply, "has given *me* up. I'm not particularly well, you see—I had pneumonia in the summer and it didn't do my lungs any good, so—I'm not painting just now, and I thought old Henry Banks and his Mrs. Venus would look after me well enough——"

It was on her tongue to suggest his coming to St. James's

doubt my word! This lady *is* in trouble, and I *haven't* seen her for a very long time, and that's that. If you can't stay, Vincent, I'll come round early to-morrow morning. Good night—dear old man. I'm so glad you've come home, and—we'll soon get you well——”

“Good night, Charles.” They shook hands, and then for a moment Beville hesitated, his troubled eyes on his wife's averted head.

“When I come in, Gracie——” he began lamely, but she cut him short.

“I am very tired,” she said in an indifferent voice, “so I'll go to sleep early. Good night.”

Beville walked to St. James's Street through the fog, picked up a taxi, and set off, miserable and indignant.

‘She's unfair to me,’ he told himself passionately, ‘most unfair. And she'll make *him* be, too. We were getting on so well when she came in—poor old Vincent, he does look ghastly!—and everything was all right, but she'll be spoiling it all. Not by words,’ his sense of justice forced him to acknowledge, ‘but by just being like that. Hurt. The proud, hurt lady. And he won't like me any more! Oh, damn it all. Damn women—I don't mean Gracie—just *women*——’

.

It was well after eleven when his taxi drew up in a steep street off Putney Hill, and he opened an iron gate and walked quickly up a mossy, gravelled path. There was less fog here, and by the faint light of a street lamp outside the wall, he could just perceive that the shrubs and the two lilac trees had grown considerably since his last visit, two years ago.

The house was tall and narrow, with an arrangement of windows, blinds, and doors that somehow gave it a supercilious, camel-like expression. There was ugly

stained glass in the front door, and behind it burned a bright light.

Presently the door opened and a young man appeared.

"Good evening, Harold——"

"Good evening, Sir——" The young man drew back. "Mother's in the dining-room," he said courteously enough, but without cordiality; "you know the way still—I suppose?"

Beville shot a quick look at him. "Yes," he answered dryly, "I still know the way——" And opening a door to the right of the passage, he went in.

The atmosphere was not exactly unpleasant, but two people had been sitting there all the evening, the air had not been renewed, and it was not fresh. The table was covered with crimson silk, and the light from the hanging light fell unshaded on the face of the woman who sat sewing under it.

"Well, Dora, my dear——"

"How do you do, Sir Charles——" Rising, she gave him one of her large, finely-shaped hands, which he held for a moment before releasing it.

"What," he then asked in a brisk voice, "is the trouble? Not you, I hope, young man?"

Harold Beale shook his head. "No, sir, not me. Mother will tell you all about it— Shall I go, Mum?"

She nodded. "Yes, dear, please. Go and sit with Charlie till I call you, there's a dear boy——"

And when the door had closed she went on without wasting time: "It's poor Charlie, Charles. He's got mixed up with a horrible girl, and she wants him to marry her——"

"Dear me," murmured Charles Beville gravely, shaking his head, "that is dreadful, Dora——"

Mrs. Beale was a large, Demeter-like woman, with quantities of horse-chestnut-coloured, glossy, hair packed tight to her head, large full eyes that were also horse-chestnut-coloured, and a beautiful thick skin in which the

red was just beginning to become too sharp-edged against the rich white. She had been very beautiful, and she was still handsome.

"You must forgive me for ringing up your house, Charles," she went on, as he sat down opposite her, "I tried both your clubs, and—I got desperate. Things have been *so* bad—and we've only got till to-morrow—I really didn't know *what* to do——"

"Never mind about ringing up, my dear. You were quite right, of course, in such an emergency. Tell me about it, Dora."

She told him. Her elder son, Charlie, who was twenty-six, and old enough to know better, only he had always been so wild, had undoubtedly promised to marry this girl—Ruby Mullett was her name, and she sold chocolates in one of the High Street cinema-houses—but since they became engaged he had found out things about her. Bad things.

"She's not a good girl, you see," the mother explained in her soft, unhurried voice. "There have been other boys——"

"I see. Of course he mustn't marry her! What is her hold over him? Letters, I suppose?"

"Yes. And—her mother is a cousin of old Mr. Goldstone, and she threatens to tell him to-morrow."

"Hermann Goldstone? His boss?"

She nodded, and sat with her hands clasped on the edge of the table, in a way he had never forgotten.

"Mr. Hermann is a *good* Jew. A proper Synagogue Jew, and you know how particular they are! If he believes Charlie has—hurt his cousin's daughter, he'll sack him at once. And it's *such* a good job, Charles, so gentlemanly—and he's doing so well at it——"

There was a pause, and then Beville asked quietly what she wanted him to do. "I'll see Charlie, of course," he said, "I've been meaning for months to come and look you all up, but I've been very busy, and away yachting

as well— But tell me exactly what you'd like me to do, Dora."

"I thought—I thought," she answered after another pause, "that perhaps you could go and see her. See Ruby, I mean. You see, you are so clever, Charles——"

"*Humph!* 'Clever'?" He gave a short ironical laugh.

"Yes. You manage things so well, and then of course your being a *real* gentleman does make a difference——"

It was many years since he had winced at her little mistakes, but it seemed a pity that she should call him a real gentleman.

"I doubt if I could do any good, my dear," he protested patiently, "if she's bent on marrying the boy— Still," he added with sudden hopefulness, "money might do it!"

And with surprise he observed her wince at his words.

"I don't like you," she murmured, dabbing at the tablecloth with her needle, "to spend any more money on us——"

"Nonsense, Dora! It's—*h'm!*—a privilege for me to do any little thing I can for you—and the boys. Where does this girl live? I couldn't see her to-night, of course, it's nearly twelve——"

"Oh, but you *could!* Charlie told her he—he was going to see a—a friend who might advise him. His guardian, he said, of course— And she'll only just be back from the Picture Palace. *Would* you go, Charles? You are so *experienced*, you see. You know the world so well, and then——"

"And then, Dora?" His handsome eyes were very kind as he smiled at her.

She sighed, her lips trembling a little. "Oh, nothing. I only meant that people always do what you want them to. Especially," she added with simplicity, "ladies."

He laughed, and bending down kissed her soft, hot cheek.

"You are a very lovely lady yourself, my dear," he said,

"so of course I'll go. By the way, what has become of Mr. Albert Walmsley?"

She blushed faintly. "He's just the same, Charles. A *very* nice man I call Albert. So good to the boys, too——"

"A nice man. I sometimes wish you could have made up your mind to marry him, Dolly!"

"I never could, somehow. Not after—you know. Don't you worry about me, though, Charles, I've been very happy, after all! The boys are so *lovely*, and then—Oh, well, I've had a good sight more than most women. You've been such a good friend to us, and besides—you *did* care for me for a time, didn't you?"

"I did indeed," he returned, with perfect truth. "And I care for you still, my dear. I admire and respect you very much indeed."

"Oh, Charles!" Her blush made her really lovely, and he was infinitely touched by her humility and sweetness.

"I should," he murmured, "have been kinder to you—and to them. But—if Charlie should lose his job, Dora, I'll see what I can do about getting him another— Now," he cut her short as she began to thank him, "call the young devil down, will you? By the way, my dear," he added quickly, "I suppose neither of them—knows?"

"Charlie doesn't, I'm sure of that, Charles, but—I'm not *quite* sure about Harold. You see, he does look rather like that Paris photograph, and he's very sharp; much sharper than poor Charlie."

"I see. Well, it doesn't much matter. Call him, Dora, will you?"

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Beville's interview with Miss Ruby Mullett was not a pleasant one, for besides the awkwardness of the situation between her and Charlie, Beville observed in her a suppressed insolence and significance towards himself.

"I hear you're Charlie's *guardian*," she began. "I suppose you're an old friend of his father and mother?"

"I am both the boys' guardian, and I've known both their parents for many years," he answered stiffly, "but that doesn't seem to have much to do with the matter in hand——"

She shrugged her shoulders. "You must," she went on, "be *very* fond of Charlie to be willing to settle this business for him, for he's done me dirt, and I tell you frankly I mean to have all I can get out of it! A young lady has her feelings——"

"Naturally. And I am willing to meet your wishes so far as I can."

"Are you his *legal* guardian?" she persisted with an unpleasant smile.

"No, I'm not. I'm a busy man, Miss Mullett, and it's late. At what amounts do you—*er*—assess the damage Charlie has done to your feelings?"

The girl looked him up and down. "Queer," she returned; "Charlie has dimples, too— But never mind," she added hastily, "you're quaita raight, it *is* laite— My solicitor thinks a thousand pounds——"

"Then your solicitor must think again," answered Beville curtly. "As I've said, I agree that as my ward has changed his mind about marrying you, you are entitled to some compensation, but I will not give you a thousand pounds nor anything like it——"

Half an hour later she had agreed to accept four hundred pounds, had written and signed a letter acknowledging that the receipt of that sum satisfied her, and that she had henceforth no claim on Mr. Charles Beale's affections, and Beville, hastily filling in and giving her a cheque, said good night to her.

Outside the house the anxious young man was waiting for him, and they walked away together.

"Is it all right, sir?" Charlie asked, and Charles nodded.

"Yes. Here's the—receipt. Hang on to it, my boy!"

Under a street lamp the tall, good-looking youth read

the letter. "Whew! That's a lot of money! It's *awfully* good of you, sir——"

"Glad to do anything for your mother—and for you, too. But let it teach you a lesson," the elder man added seriously. "She's not a nice girl, and women who aren't nice are—the very deuce."

"It's taught me a lesson all right! I suppose," Beale went on, "*you* can't understand how I could have been such a fool, but the truth is, sir, I've always been a bit of an idiot about girls. And Ruby was—*er*—sort of fascinating, though a gentleman like you couldn't see it, of course——"

Beville checked a half-groan. "Oh, I *understand*," he declared. "She's handsome in a way, and—*er*——"

How well he understood this young man and his weakness.

"Well, Charlie," he said, standing still and holding out his hand, "I'll say good night now."

"Good night, sir," returned the young man, "and thanks *very* much. I'll go home now and tell Mum about your kindness——"

Beville walked down the hill rather thoughtfully.

CHAPTER TWELVE

THE following week was for Charles Beville a confused and uncomfortable one.

His wife, when he tried to make her understand about his late visit to the woman who had rung him up, proved cold; uninterested.

"I'd rather," she said, looking up through her horn-rimmed spectacles from her book, "not discuss it, Charles——"

"But, Gracie, I want you to understand that—*er*—that it wasn't at all what you thought it was——" He was standing in front of her, his hands plunged deep into his jacket pockets, his big, beautifully-shod feet apart, an angry, bewildered look on his face.

"But I have not told you what I thought it was," she answered quietly.

"Nonsense! Faces talk just as much as tongues. Listen to me, Gracie. Put down," he suddenly roared, his scant patience suddenly at an end, "that damned book, and listen to me! Sorry, my dear."

She laid the book open and face down, in her lap, and took off her glasses, but she said nothing.

Violet's illness had made indelible marks in her long face, but the sea air, and the relief of the girl's recovery, had given her a less tense expression, and improved the quality of her good though ageing skin. Beville, despite his vexation, still admired her. She *was* a bit sheep-like, and her lashes, so frail and so blonde, would have been better for a touch of make-up, he again thought, but, after all, those large, pale-blue eyes were pretty nice, and he liked her jaw-bone. "There's something," he reflected before he spoke, '*about* Gracie——'

"You hurt my feelings very much last night," he began,

voicing his grievance; "I told you the truth, and you didn't believe me, and I think it was beastly of you."

"I didn't mean to hurt your feelings, but—I have mine, too, and you seem to forget that."

"I *don't*, Gracie! That's a dreadful thing to say. I wouldn't have told you a word about—that poor lady. You see, I'd forgot I'd left the door open. I'd *never* let her ring up the house——"

Aghast, he realized his betrayal.

"Clubs," commented Lady Grace coldly, "must be *extremely* useful——"

"*H'm!* . . . Get *out*, Flannel!——" He was silent for a moment, and then he broke out eagerly: "Look here, Gracie, I give you my word of honour—my word of *honour*, mind you!—that it's over two years since I've seen Mrs. Beale."

"Oh?" she raised her fair eyebrows, but some of the bitterness was gone from her face.

"You believe me, of course."

"Of course I believe you."

"Well, then——?"

'If only,' she thought, 'he didn't look so like a rather stupid, very well-meaning little boy!'

After a pause she rose. "I've ordered the car for eleven," she said, "I'm going to see Vincent. I am very much worried about him, and I want to have a talk with Mrs. Venus about his food, and so on——"

Beville nodded. It did not occur to either of them that Vincent's unexpected return was in any way embarrassing or complicating—as indeed, oddly enough, it was not.

"Good," said Beville. "But—Gracie. Do please believe that my going to see that lady last night couldn't in any possible way offend or hurt you. Honestly, she sent for me only because she was in trouble about one of her sons, and needed help."

Lady Grace's lucent eyes stared straight into his darker ones. "'One of her sons.' And—you see, Charles, you've

hurt me pretty badly for years, and—old scars can be painful at times. As you tell me that this Mrs. Beale is nothing to you, I of course believe you, but—was she never anything to you?"

It must be borne in mind that Charles Beville's greatest wish was to get back to normal terms with his wife; that for months his life had been entirely blameless; that his dearest ambition was to become a cherished Darby to his admired and cherished Joan.

And one must not forget that his wife had never asked him questions, so that her now putting this obviously unwilling yet irresistible one to him meant, he knew vaguely, something new in her feeling for him; a new and to him most hopeful interest.

He knew that if he could have assured her that Dora Meakin—she had adopted the name Beale because of its slight resemblance to Beville—had never been anything to him, he would in a bound be one great step nearer his goal. That in her belief, and her remorse at having unfairly doubted him, some of her barriers would crash, and he could, he was rather innocently aware, trust his own emotional impulses to make the most of the crisis.

A flush crept up his face, his lips trembled, his now elongated dimples flickered for a second. "Gracie—" he murmured, and her strained, sad face softened, and her hands moved without her knowing it.

"Oh, Charles—" she murmured.

Then he drew back, straightening his heavy shoulders.

"Yes," he said in a harsh voice, "she was something to me. Very much. Years ago, before our marriage."

She was silent, and he went on. "We—we have two sons, Gracie."

He had done it. His boats were aflame behind him.

Staring at her, he waited. Wasn't she going to ask him about after their marriage? Wasn't she going to give him a chance to clear himself at least of *that* sin, of sin against his young bride?

She was not. She did not.

The light had gone from her eyes, the faint colour from her narrow cheeks, and taking up her book she closed it.

"Shall I," she asked in her coldest voice, "tell Vincent you will be coming to see him this afternoon?"

"Yes. No. Yes, please," he answered as she went to the door, which he did not open for her. "I shall lunch at the club, if you don't mind——"

She was gone, and he was left with his dog and his cat, a hurt and indignant man, wroth with one he loved, and with the resultant madness indeed working in his brain.

Intelligent people can array facts and judge them, while slow-witted, stupid people helplessly flounder under a feeling of injustice.

But Beville, though stupid, was not too stupid to realize that his wife was really being unjust as well as unfair to him, and he writhed in his inability to combat this injustice.

'I've done everything she wanted me to,' he raged, as he marched out into the grey day, his dog at his heels; 'I've been as good as gold; the only woman I've seen anything of is Edith, and God knows Edith is good. Why, Edith makes me feel as good as *she* is! She's as good as Gracie, and better, too, for she's *kinder*. She understands a man, and Gracie won't even try to——'

He had been going to see Vincent that morning, but Gracie had barged in and was going there herself, so he couldn't.

This was another grievance. 'She will make him think I'm rotten,' his thoughts rambled on; 'she won't tell him about poor Dora—Dora's a splendid woman; never a thought for herself, all these years—but she'll look the injured angel. Oh, damn—oh, damn!'

At his club he found some letters, and going into the smoking-room, sat down to read them.

One was from Lady Manisty, asking him to come to see her. "I want you to be very kind," she wrote, "and

give me some money to help two poor sisters—sewing-women—both of whom have T.B.—to go to Switzerland. I am paying for one of them, but my income, like everybody else's, is going down pretty quickly, and of course I have poor Erica's children on my hands, and my usual annual subscriptions to different charities, so I really can't do any more. Perhaps you'd come to tea to-day or to-morrow? I shan't rob you of very much, but I know you'll be kind, as you always are——"

She did not ask Lady Grace to come with him. He and his wife had dined in Park Lane three or four weeks before, and Lady Manisty had dined with them recently, to meet the Spanish Ambassador and his wife, but Beville knew that Edith suffered in meeting Gracie—not from jealousy, but from an unconquerable feeling of remorse.

'Dear Edith,' he reflected, 'how kind she is. Really *charitable*, Edith is, and of course I'll help her— At least I *have* got money!'

His fortune was large, and what was even better, it was, humanly speaking, safe. Thirty-five years before, his long-headed father had invested all he possessed in the electric-lighting of various important commercial towns, and as towns must be lighted, nothing but what the law calls an act of God could ruin him.

'I'll go this afternoon,' he decided, already a little comforted; Edith was such a consoling creature. She would cheer him up.

But his face changed as he took up his next letter, for it was, he saw, from Drusilla Battle, and it was in her wildest writing; her dope-writing, uneven, scrawling, almost illegible.

'Oh, God,' he muttered, subconsciously feeling that God was for the moment anywhere but in His Heaven.

"Charles" [ran that crazy, spidery writing], "if you don't come to see me I shall die. I know I'm going to kill to kill myself. I am too dreadfully unhap. I know you are are back in England because Madeleine saw you. It's

seven since I saw you. Seven. And you never answered my letters. You have no right to treat me so. I love you. Why did you say you love me. Oh, my daring, I beg you come. At once. Or I will take an overdose overdose. I swear before God I. DRUSILLA."

The confusion, the omitted words, the repeated syllables, he knew, meant that the wretched woman was nearly insane with drugs and alcohol.

'I *never* said I loved her,' he groaned mentally. 'Little liar! But it *is* seven months since I saw her. And I suppose the poor little bitch does love me. Christ, I wish I'd never seen her——'

He had no idea what he ought to do. He loathed the thought of Drusilla Battle, but he could not forget that he had not always loathed the sight of her, or that whereas he had given her only small and base things, he had taken from her all she had to give.

'I wish,' he thought disconsolately, 'I wasn't such a damn fool—I never liked poor little Dru—who *could* like her? It was just . . . Oh, hell! . . . And then she was mad about me, and that flattered me. What an idiot I am——'

But reviling himself did no good, and he knew it. He must make up his mind. And in order to accomplish this to him so difficult task—it was easy enough when his mind made itself up, as it usually did when it should not have done so, but a different matter when he deliberately tried to make it up—he had recourse to his favourite method: he went for one of his long walks.

Taking a taxi to Golder's Green, he dismissed it there and plunged into the muddy November roads beyond it.

He was a puzzled and unhappy man, but the mere walking, the regular, rhythmic stretching of his muscles, brought its usual relief. The more he walked the lighter seemed his big body, and the less tense and dull his mind.

He walked for two hours, following his nose, and then,

as was his way, took a train back, reaching town about two, pleasantly tired and hungry.

He had decided to write a very kind but resolute and final note to Miss Battle; a note that would force the pathetic but pestiferous little creature to understand that, in brutal words, he had done with her.

After all, he was in no way responsible for her deplorable condition; she had been an alcoholic and a taker of drugs before he ever saw her, and as to her reputation, she had, so far as he knew, never had one.

He, to put it plainly, had been one of many, and he had never wished to be more than one of many, so her falling in love with him was her misfortune and not his fault.

'I'll go and see Edith at tea-time,' he reflected as he hailed a taxi at the London terminus, 'and I wonder if I couldn't tell her about Gracie and Dora? She's very sensible, Edith is, and so much like Gracie that she may be able to make me see why Gracie is behaving as she is; damned if I can see now! She might even say a word to Gracie——'

He pulled himself together. 'Oh, no, blast it, of course she wouldn't do that——'

After his chop and ale at the club, he wrote his note to Drusilla—it was, he felt, a very clear and conclusive note, though as kind as he could make it—and sent it off to her by messenger. Then he decided to go to Clarges Street and see Vincent. 'I might as well see how Gracie's visit has influenced him,' he told himself sagely, 'and there are millions of things for us to talk about besides that—I'll tell him about Dora, too. Hang it, he *is* a man, though he's such a shrimp, poor old boy, and he'll understand. . . . And by Jove, he *could* explain it to Gracie! Now that,' he congratulated himself as he set out, 'is a first-rate idea. A real happy thought! And thank God I've settled Dru——'

A pale sun had penetrated the woolly, iron-grey clouds,

and feeling much better for his exercise and his luncheon, he marched westward a more hopeful man than he had been a few hours before.

Vincent, he decided, probably wasn't half so bad as he looked, and he must go and be overlooked by St. John Birch. St. John Birch was an awfully clever lung man, and he'd be sure to do dear old Vincent good——

No lark was on the wing, but after all, God seemed a little nearer His Heaven than He had seemed that morning.

Mr. Banks's private hotel in Clarges Street was a survival. It was dingy, cramped, crowded with over-large, mid-Victorian furniture, but it was in an inexplicable way comfortable. People came back to it year after year, and were oddly proud of being one of the little ex-butler's *habitués*. Beville knew the place well, and after shaking hands with Banks, who had once been in the Duke of Ringborough's service, went up to Vincent's room by himself.

'Funny old place,' he reflected, 'and it has a smell all of its own; moth-balls, and furniture-polish, and chops, and that stuff for brass. . . . No. 19. That's where Dick Parton had mumps in Coronation year!'

No. 19 was a small suite of two rooms and a bathroom, and after knocking at the sitting-room door and getting no reply, Beville naturally opened the door. The dingy, cosy room was empty, though a bright fire burnt in the hearth, and Beville was about to assume that Lundy had gone out when he was, as Lundy would have said, nailed to the floor by the sound of a voice in the bedroom: his wife's voice.

He was not angry or suspicious as the voice reached his ears, but he was intensely surprised.

Gracie had left him at a little after eleven to come to see Vincent, and now it was getting on for four, and she was still here. *Why?* he wondered.

And from wondering to inquiring was but a step; a

step he would at once have taken, had he not been arrested by Lundy's deep tones.

"That," the Frenchman was saying, "is perfectly true, Gracie, but I repeat that I think you are not treating him fairly."

"But, Vincent," she protested, "*I am*. I'm being very nice to him. We go to dinner-parties together—oftener than I've done for years—and I went to a most idiotic play with him. One of *his* kind of play——"

Never in his life had Charles Beville stooped to eaves-dropping, but, six foot two, and erect as he was, dwarfing the overcrowded room, he was stooping to it now.

"You are begging the question, Gracie," he heard the Frenchman's stern voice go on; "the poor devil is doing his best, and you—are not helping him. As one says in England, you do not pull your weight in the boat."

"You are unjust," was her proud protest. "How can you expect me to forget in six months the insults and suffering of twenty-five years?"

"I do not expect you to forget. And Charles himself told me that he does not *want* you to forget. He wants your forgiveness, Gracie."

"I have forgiven him."

"You have not."

Lundy broke into a terrible fit of coughing, and the listener heard the clink of ice in a glass as he drank.

"Don't talk any more, Vincent," Gracie said gently, "you are tired. I shouldn't have come back——"

So she had come back. She had not been there all the time.

"Yes, yes, Gracie. I *had* to tell you these things! That's why I had Banks ring you up——" With an effort the sick man stopped coughing, and went on. "I have known for years about that woman Dora Meakin," he said, "and she is a rather fine creature, I believe. Charles left her just after he met you—left her for good—and she

understood, and made no fuss or protest. A *good* woman, my dear."

"But—" and a new note was in her voice, a note that acutely hurt Beville, "she has *sons*. His sons! I've always known he wanted a son, Vincent, and I——"

"Hush, dear. Charles has educated and looked after those boys, but—it was *your* son he wanted—it was a grief you shared, and your *not* having one should have drawn you together, I think——"

"No, no," she cried sharply. Then Beville heard her rise and push back her chair. "I must go, Vincent. Some people are coming to tea, and it's late——"

"Very well, Gracie. But—I have told you how ill I am, so you mustn't mind my being persistent—I repeat, there can be no doubt whatever that Charles has been gravely in the wrong; for years his behaviour was what is called unpardonable. But you *did* promise to pardon him, and you're not doing it. *Wait*— Don't interrupt me," he added sternly, as Beville backed towards the door in readiness for a speedy retreat.

"You are not helping him, Gracie," the deep, weak voice went on. "I have loved you as a man, and now I love you nearly as a disembodied spirit, and I may say what I know to be the truth : unless you will be a wife to Charles, you are helping to ruin him. You will drive him to desperation, and he is weak. Be generous, my dear. Help him to help himself. Be to him the wife he needs."

There was a pause, and then Beville, his nostrils distended and wax-white, heard his wife's reply.

"You ask too much of me, Vincent. I wish to do my duty, and Heaven knows I do want to make *you* happy, too, but—I have been too badly hurt. I have suffered too long and too—bitterly. That one thing I can never do."

No one heard the soft closing of No. 19's sitting-room door; no one saw the big man tiptoeing noiselessly down the narrow stairs; no one who knew him met him as he walked slowly and heavily to Piccadilly through the rain.

So that was that. Now he knew. She had said she would forgive him, and begin over, but she hadn't forgiven him! She *couldn't*.

'I've been as good as gold,' he mourned again to himself, 'I've done every mortal thing I could think of to please her, and—I've failed. It's no good. The whole damn thing is just no good——'

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Beville went home, but he went straight up to Violet's room, and as he had opened the door with his latchkey and both the menservants were busy, no one knew that he was in the house.

He had a great need of solitude, for he had a problem to solve; a very important decision to make.

Should he or should he not tell Gracie of his disgraceful act in listening to her conversation with Vincent?

This was what he had to decide, and he must decide before dinner-time. So far as his own feelings went, he would have preferred owning up that he had heard Vincent's and her talk; he was by nature not only a truthful but a frank man; secrets irked him, and gave him an irrational feeling of shame.

But if he told Gracie, the embarrassment would only be shifted from him to her, and he felt that he had no right to cause her embarrassment because he had been mean enough to eavesdrop. 'Damned unfair,' he thought as he walked up and down in Violet's quiet room. 'That's what it would be. She had a perfect right to tell Vincent how she feels—just what *I* went there to do, anyhow!—and what right have I to make things any harder for her than they already are?'

His anger had melted, as his anger always did; he still felt that he was unfairly treated, but the blame of that injustice had shifted from Gracie to—to what? He had no definite word for it, but it was something like fate, or

luck that, he now considered, had played him false. Up here at the top of the house it was very silent. None of the furniture was shrouded, no dust sheets disfigured the pleasant spaces of the large room, and the very bed looked as if it were to be slept in in a few hours. How well he knew it all! The delicately rosy walls with the old pictures the child Violet had loved, the ancient Florentine mirror that had framed her budding prettiness, even her first dressing-table service—ivory and silver—were neatly set out in their places.

And on the floor lay, spatchcocked, and white as a snow-drift, the Polar bear skin he had given her years before.

It was by her own wish that the room had been left untouched but for the half-dozen photographs and knick-knacks she had taken to Saucers, and now her quiet, queer little spirit seemed to the hurt, lonely man to be still there, and somehow it comforted him.

After an hour's restless pacing up and down, and another hour's resting in the big chintz chair by the empty hearth, he knew what he was going to do about his wife, and it seemed to his simple mind as if Violet had helped him to decide.

"I *won't* tell her I heard," he declared aloud. "It couldn't do any good—if she feels like that she'll never really forgive me and take me back, and as it's my own fault I must just grin and bear it." 'If I *told* her,' his thoughts went on—it was noticeable that no thought of his wife's scorn at his eavesdropping came into his head—it would only make her unhappy and embarrassed, and that's not good—'

Rising, he went to the bed, and leaning down, kissed the little embroidered pillow that lay on top of the larger ones.

Then he went downstairs.

Lady Grace had a small dinner-party that night, and this was a relief to both her and her husband. She looked, Beville noticed, older again, and tired, but he admired her

immensely as she sat at the head of his table, talking quietly and agreeably to her neighbours.

Her nose really was too long—one of those long, well-bred noses so much oftener seen in France than in England—but he liked it. He had, he reflected, always liked it. And her silky hair, in the shaded candlelight, shone like silver. Surely it had grown much greyer in the last few months?

Well, why not? His own was rapidly thinning. 'I'll be as bald as a golf-ball before long,' his thoughts ran on, as he talked to his cousin-in-law, Lady Olivia Chievely, the old Duke of Ringborough's widowed daughter.

"Doesn't Papa look well?" Lady Olivia asked, gazing proudly at her handsome old father.

"He does indeed. Not a young man in England to touch him," agreed Beville. The duke did not approve of him, and he knew it, but that didn't prevent the old gentleman's being a stunner.

"I love Mr. Lundy's portrait more and more," pursued Lady Olivia. "Sometimes I think he—Mr. Lundy—*fore-saw* what Papa would be like in ten years' time, for the portrait, which was always *good*, of course, is a great deal more like him now than it was when it was painted——"

"What's that, Livvy?" The old man had sharp ears as well as sharp eyes. "Talking of that portrait of Lundy's? A fine piece of work, very fine, though it flatters me——"

"Oh, *no*, Uncle Cyprian——"

"Oh, *no*, Papa——"

The old man shook his leonine head with vigour. "Oh, *yes*! As a matter of fact," he added, "I never *did* do justice to my portraits——"

Lord and Lady Benchester, with a Mr. and Mrs. Perkins, were the only other guests, and when the ladies had gone to the drawing-room, Harry Benchester, as the duke and Mr. Perkins were comfortably discussing Mr. Winston Churchill, moved and sat by his old friend and host.

"Anything wrong, Charles?" he asked in an undertone.

"Wrong? Of course not. Why?"

"Oh—I d'know. You look a bit pinched, that's all. Kidneys all right, old man?"

"Good Lord, Harry, what an idiot you are! I'm as right as rain, thanks."

"Good. You look like hell, though— Nice frock of Gracie's. Blue always did suit her——"

Presently he went on, one eye on the now slightly acrimonious pair at the other end of the table: "I hear your little—protégée Miss Battle's been going the pace a bit. George saw her at Zero's the other night, blind to the world. Seems a pity, doesn't it?"

"A terrible pity. There are," Beville added, "a lot of nice things about poor little Drusilla——"

"Certain of it, Charles; certain of it. Only——" Lord Benchester set down his glass and wiped his loose lips, "she is a little—*er—bitcheous*—isn't she?"

The duke at that moment burst into a cackle of amusement, Mr. Perkins joining him with the apologetic air of a man laughing at his own joke, and Beville made a move.

"Shall we go upstairs, Uncle Cyprian?" he asked, and the duke rose with the jerky nimbleness of very old dandies.

The drawing-room was at its best on a firelit evening, and the women's beautiful frocks showed to the best advantage against its subdued colours and its shadowy heights.

Lady Grace was in blue, Mrs. Perkins, a very pretty woman, in white, and Lady Olivia in black. There were many, but not too many, flowers on the numerous tables, and the air smelt of pine-cones, lavender, and orris-root.

A pleasant, handsome room; a room any man might be proud of.

'I won't ever let her know,' Beville thought, as he drank his coffee, 'and I'll never again pester her. She shall do exactly as she likes——'

It occurred to him that his own future seemed singularly denuded of promises of happiness, but he was in a humble mood and a courageous one. He was facing the truth;

that however much he might henceforth have to suffer, he would be having only what he deserved.

The old duke, who disliked him, being impervious to his charm because it was so like the charm he himself had had half a century before, studied his face quietly for a moment. 'Charles,' he mused, 'is improving. His face is—finer, somehow. I'll make an occasion to be a little nice to him before we leave——'

And Lady Grace, as she glanced at her husband being talked to by Rosemary Perkins, sighed. 'Poor Charles,' she thought compassionately, 'if only I *could* forget! I suppose I am hard, as Vincent says, but how *could* I forget all those years? . . . Still, I'll be as nice as I possibly can to him—I was wrong not to believe him about that Dora, and it was really very decent of him to own up about her and—their sons. Yes, it was honest and brave of him——'

And no one heard the limping footsteps coming slowly nearer.

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"*Signora*," stammered Domenico at the front door a few moments later, "*signora*, her ladyship is *out*—no one is at home—I— Oh, *Madonna mia*!—I beg you, madame, not to come in— You are not—you are not well, madame."

But she pushed him aside so roughly that he nearly fell, and a moment later she had opened the drawing-room door.

For a long moment no one spoke; there was in her aspect something so frantic, so abominable, that no one could do more than stare at her in horror.

She was in an evening dress of pink lace, but the bodice was torn from the bosom to the waist, revealing a crumpled and coffee-stained nightgown. She wore silver shoes, but they were worn on bare feet.

And her face, in its almost idiotic vagueness, was horrible to see, for one eye was made up as if for the stage, with

a delphinium-blue eyelid, and fiercely spiked lashes, while the other looked almost innocent and childlike, with its golden lashes and paintless lid.

Her hair was tumbled and dull, and as she advanced, holding out a hovering, jewelled hand, everyone stirred with horror; for the lovely hand was dirty.

"I've come," she said, stifling a hiccough, "to fetch Charles. D-don't let me—break up your party. I only want Charles. Come along, d-darling——"

Harry Benchester took a tentative step forward. "How do you do, Miss Battle," he began, "this is delightful of you——"

Grace Beville motioned him to be silent. She was deathly pale, as was Lady Olivia Chievely, but she was composed.

"How do you do," she said quietly. "Won't you let my husband take you downstairs for a little supper, as it's so late? Charles, I'm sure Miss Battle would like some supper——"

"Supper," repeated the girl, suddenly sombre. "Supper? No, I don't want anything to eat. Besides, I've got a party on at my own house. Lots of j-jolly people. Come along, darling——"

"For God's sake, man, go," whispered Benchester, and Beville tried to pull himself together.

Then, as he reached her, Drusilla Battle's mood changed, and lurching forward she gave a little jump and put her arms round his neck, bursting into a torrent of endearments, blasphemy, and vulgarity as could have been compassed by no sane woman.

"For God's sake, Drusilla," he cried angrily, forcing her arms back to her sides, "*shut up——*"

The phrase was so ludicrously inadequate that Lady Benchester gave a nervous giggle, and the girl turned on her.

"Who are you, I'd like to know," she cried, "with your false pearls and dyed hair? Laugh at me, will you, you

bitch? Come along, darling. I—I had to fetch you. I couldn't *bear* it. Ten days," she went on, "ten whole bloody days since you've been to see me, and I love you so. . . . Come on, my sweet, d-darling, bloody little pet——"

The old duke turned to Lady Grace and offered her his arm. "Come, my dear," he said quietly, "we will go into the billiards-room. Come along, Harry—Perkins, bring my daughter and your wife, will you——?"

They marched, a hurried, irregular, absurdly pompous yet somehow dignified procession, to the far door, and disappeared, and without a word Beville half-led, half-carried Drusilla Battle downstairs.

He thought, as they reached the ground-floor, that his humiliation was complete; that nothing could possibly shame him more. But he was wrong, for while they stood waiting for the taxi that Domenico, now standing with incomparable dignity by the door, had rung up, Miss Battle was suddenly and abominably sick.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

WHEN, after a wretched night, he waked the next morning, Beville met with a surprise that made him angrier than he could remember ever to have been in his life, for this time his anger was, and he knew it, a righteous one.

His wife had an hour before gone, with Isabella, to the Duke of Ringborough's house.

"The message," explained Domenico who, while his master read Lady Grace's letter, had hovered round the table with the anxious fluttering of an old person subjected to sudden strong emotion, "came at half-past seven, *Signore*, and her ladyship told me it was very urgent, and that I must wake her ladyship at once——"

"What the deuce do you mean with 'her ladyship' and 'her ladyship'?" Beville snapped, helping himself to bacon and eggs.

"Scusi, Sir Charles," was the gentle apology, "I mean that Lady Olivia rang up. *Sua Signoria* was taken ill at six, it seems, and was very h'anxious to have her lady—Lady Grace—come at once. I do hope," the old man added, "that 'is Grace is not seriously ill——"

It had always puzzled him a little that that other old man's title should be the same as his own ladyship's Christian name, but he had long been resigned to the strangeness of things English.

"I don't know," returned Beville, "much about it—but I shall be going to Manchester Square this morning——"

Lady Grace's letter was short. "Dear Charles" [it said]. "Even you can hardly have expected to find me at St. James's Place this morning after that abominable scene last night. Uncle Cyprian arranged for me to come here on the pretext that he is ill—because of the servants—and he

agrees with me that this really must be the end between you and me. I will not see you, and I will not write again, so please don't try to induce me to do either of these things. Violet is so much better that she will see it all rationally, and not be too unhappy about it. Uncle Cyprian would like you to come to see him this morning, and he will convince you that the divorce must be begun at once. There will be no more question of my marrying Vincent, of course, or anyone else, but I insist on having my perfect freedom, and without an hour's unnecessary delay. Please accept this as my ultimate and unshakable resolution. GRACE BEVILLE."

And this had happened to him when for six months he had lived the life of a monk; when he had been as good as gold.

The injustice of it was fuel to his anger, and as he ate his breakfast his face alarmed the old servant, who always made a point of waiting on his master himself.

'More trouble,' mourned Domenico in *petto*, 'and no wonder! That woman last night was a rottenness; a filth. *Che porcheria!*——'

But he was shrewd, and his idea of the situation was very near the truth, so that his old affection for his master whom, with Latin shrewdness, he quite understood to be little more than a huge schoolboy, welled up in him until he could barely contain his sympathy.

"It is a beautiful day, sir," he began presently; "there is real sunshine in the park——"

But for once Beville did not respond; he was brooding over Gracie's cruelty in giving him no chance to explain. 'Any one must have seen,' he thought, 'that that poor little beast was drunk as well as drugged, and no one with any sense would have paid any attention to what she said. 'Not seen her for ten days' indeed, when I hadn't set eyes on her since Gracie forgave me! By God,' he concluded savagely, emptying his teacup and rising, 'a fine way to forgive a fellow, keeping him at arm's length for six

months, and then believing a girl like Drusilla Battle when she's as tight as a drum! It's an excuse, that's what it is. Just an excuse to get rid of me, after all, and it's abominable of Gracie. Outrageous, it is. . . . And Uncle Cyprian, too, a man, and a man of the world. And he was worse than I am—than I *was*, I mean—in his youth! I suppose he thinks I've never heard about the Comtesse de Chaux, but I have, and at least no one has ever cut his throat on my account, as de Chaux did *on his*—'

But as he walked towards Ringborough House his indignation towards the duke softened somewhat. The duke was over eighty, and he was a very frail old man with a daily feeble hold on life, whereas he, Charles Beville, was not yet fifty-three, and as sound as a bell.

'Damn it,' he reflected, 'one can't really blame the old boy for being upset last night. It *was* a pretty foul business! *God*, how she looked. That nightgown under the dress wasn't even *clean*— But I'll tell him the truth, and he's bound to believe me, as I'm not a liar, and then in common decency he'll *have* to tell Gracie, and then Gracie will jolly well owe me an apology! By Jove, she *will* owe me an apology, too, for no matter how horrible it was, it wasn't my fault— No, this time it just *wasn't* my fault!'

This conviction brought him one of his sudden glows of hopefulness, and to celebrate it he gave the pale flower-seller outside the Berkeley Grill-room half-a-crown for a shilling buttonhole.

His mentality was such that he had completely forgotten that while Miss Battle's intrusion into his wife's drawing-room really was a thing of which he was technically guiltless, he could not be held innocent of the wretched young woman's emotional condition; that it was beyond a doubt his doing that she had so lost all sense of proportion and decency as to come there.

But the Duke of Ringborough had not forgotten this, and very forcefully and incontrovertibly he pointed it out,

half an hour later, to his crestfallen and surprised nephew-in-law.

"There is," the old gentleman explained with cold patience, "not a bit of use in your trying to make out that that disgusting and humiliating scene was not your fault, for it *was*. You assure me you had not seen this Miss—*er*—Battle—for six months, and I of course believe you. One thing you never *have* been, and that's a liar. But if you had not—let us say encouraged the unfortunate creature's—*er*—passion for you, she would not have dreamt of intruding on my niece's drawing-room——"

"*'Your niece's drawing-room'*," commented Beville, who had at once seized the nicety of the phrase.

"Yes. For Grace will always be my niece, and in the very shortest possible time she will—most fortunately for herself!—have ceased to be your wife."

There was a pause, for Beville knew that there was nothing for him to say to this thin, frail, inimical old man standing in front of his study fire.

"I think," the duke added, remotely, "that no more need be said. My niece will stay here with my daughter and me, and I have already sent for Mr. Rivers to come to see us this afternoon——"

Beville's emotionality-rooted rage was as dead as Moses, but in its place was a new, cold, hard feeling that he had never before felt; a sense of being cruelly and unfairly treated that was new to him, and that he dimly knew to be an enduring one.

"Very well," he said quietly, "I'll not detain you. You will, of course, tell *my wife*——" he paused with a curiously uncharacteristic, haughty smile, "the truth about Miss Battle——"

"Certainly I will tell her, but that, I assure you, will make no difference. The truth is, Grace's being forced by Violet's danger to—*er*—forgive you, was a great misfortune for her, and but for Violet's danger I should have done my utmost to get her her freedom then. You have

been a most abominable husband, Beville, and her patience has been astounding, and it is high time she got rid of you."

Beville turned pale, so that only his ears had any colour, and for a moment he did not speak.

Then with a rather pompous bow he made his *adieux*.

"I have," he said quietly, "nothing to say in answer to your—" he paused again, "your explanation. Good morning."

And he went away, leaving the old man, little though he had ever liked his niece's husband, oddly ill-at-ease.

'By God, he took it well,' the duke thought. 'I'd never have expected him to have so much dignity——'

Lady Manisty was arranging flowers when Beville came in. She wore a big-checked pinafore over her frock, and her blue *crêpe* sleeves were rolled up over her beautiful arms. On the American cloth-covered table stood a great array of vases, already full of water, and with happy skill she was filling them with flowers of all kinds.

The pale November sun, coming in through the window behind her, touched her hair with a fugitive gold, as her graceful occupation touched her whole personality with a fugitive youth. 'By Jove——' thought Beville, in the midst of his indignation and unhappiness.

"Oh, Charles," she cried, as Harvey opened the door, "how *nice* to see you! I'm too wet to shake hands with you, but I *am* glad. Sit down. Aren't these roses lovely?"

The room was a small, nameless one, belonging to the servants' quarters, and the chairs were of plain wood; the floor was covered with blue-and-white linoleum, and the walls were white.

And somehow the strange environment lent to Edith Manisty a new and homely quality that to the harassed and lonely man was poignant and comforting.

"I never saw you d-doing this before," he commented clumsily, with the slight stammer of his embarrassed moments.

She looked up, pushing back with a wet, white hand a loosened strand of hair. "No, I suppose you haven't, but I always do my own flowers; I know just how I want them, you know, and then—it's such *fun*——"

What a sweet, gentle woman she was! And how becoming to women such little homely jobs were. Gracie liked to poke about her pot-plants, but it was Domenico who "set up" the flowers at St. James's Place. . . .

'And Edith would never have been unjust and hard to a fellow who was honestly doing his damndest,' he ruminated, while she put the finishing touches, with delicate pullings and coaxings, to a bowl of old-fashioned tea-roses.

"Is—is anything wrong, Charles?" she asked, as he seemed sunk in an unhappy brooding that threatened to go on indefinitely.

He started. "I beg your pardon, my dear—I was thinking. Yes, Edith, everything's wrong——"

"Not *Violet*?" was her quick inquiry, and he rose, drawing a deep breath.

"No, no," he cried. "Oh, no, thank God. I had a long letter from her only the other day, and she's splendid. But—well, Edith, to put it into a few words, Gracie *is* divorcing me."

Lady Manisty looked for a moment at the big scissors with which she had been cutting the stems of some white camellias. "After all, Charles?" she asked, clearing her throat.

He nodded. "After all."

"Come into the drawing-room, I've finished here—Will you have a drink?"

"No, thanks. Let me unbutton that thing——"

Turning, she stood still while he unbuttoned the pinafore, and out of the homely girl-cocoon appeared the beautifully dressed, middle-aged woman of the world, and abstracted though he was, he was conscious of a feeling of regret as he followed her into the drawing-room.

"Do you want to tell me about it?" She sat down by the fire as she spoke, and looked quietly up at him.

"Yes, I've come on purpose to tell you." Until that moment he had not quite realized how much he wanted to tell her; he had not recognized the fact that in his new kind of indignation he had instinctively, without reasoning, come straight to her. But she may have known.

She listened as she always did listen, intently and without interruption, to his long story, learning about him, in his desperate frankness, many things she had at most only suspected up to then. She had heard years before about Dora Meakin and her boys, but she had, if not forgotten them, at least assumed them to be in that far-off, indefinite, longitude- and latitude-less distance to which we all unconsciously consign people whose lives do not touch our own, and it was a kind of shock to her to realize that they were still in England, and even in London.

"Are they—nice boys?" she asked, as he paused to light a cigarette, and he nodded. "They are. Very nice boys. That is natural, too, for Dora is a fine woman. A really awfully good sort," he added with the simplicity that always so exaggeratedly touched her.

He was just as frank about Drusilla Battle, though his simple recital of his acquaintance with her seemed to his hearer rather less affecting.

"It was all my fault at first, of course; but—after Violet's illness I— No one could help being sorry for Drusilla, but—well, of course, I broke it off then. . . . She's written to me no end of times," he concluded, "since I saw her in April—or was it May?—but I never went near her. I felt an awful brute, of course, but I never went. Not *once*."

There was pride in his voice, and Edith repressed a smile. It hurt her to know these things, but it was so good that he trusted her! And how plain it was that he needed a real friend; a woman friend.

She had little vanity, and her love was deep, so she was generous and anxious to give him all that he needed from her.

"Well," he concluded, "that's the story, my dear. And now, knowing it all, what do you think? Do *you* think Gracie is fair to divorce me now, when I haven't done one single thing?"

After a pause, during which she wondered at his ignorance, she answered him.

"My dear Charles," she said, "is it possible that you don't realize that she *can't* divorce you?"

"The hell she can't! I *do* beg your pardon, Edith, but what d'you mean? *Why* can't she?"

"Because she—condoned things, and—took you back, and because since then you have not done anything for which a divorce would be granted!"

He sprang up from his chair, a little of his usual ruddiness coming back to his haggard cheeks.

"By Jove!" he cried, banging his right fist into his left palm. "By Jove, of *course* she can't!"

"Surely the duke knows that, Charles?"

"Oh, the fox! Oh, the artful old fox!" For a moment he chuckled with delighted relief, and then suddenly his face fell. "That won't do any good, though, Edith," he said. "She—she doesn't want me any more. She doesn't *like* me any more, you see, so what's the good? That's why Uncle Cyprian just carried on though he of course *knew*. He knew I'd have to *let* her. Divorce me, I mean. Common decency, you see——"

For a moment she did not speak; his remark had surprised her, but it had also given her a sharp pang of a hope she had forbidden herself to feel.

"You see what I mean, my dear, don't you?" he pursued. "As she really doesn't like me any more, and wants to be free——"

"Oh, Charles, how *generous* you are! You are so much—finer—than anyone has ever understood—except me.

I've always known, and—" In quick confusion she broke off, a blush beautifying her face.

"You've always liked me better than I deserved, Edith," he answered thoughtfully; "I suppose everybody has *some* good qualities—even an 'abominable' fellow like me—(that was Uncle—I mean to say the duke's—word)—and if I have any—well, it's you who brings 'em out. I know I'm awfully weak, because people do influence me so easily, but your influence on me is good. I was ready to kill that old man—he's so *cruel*!—and I hated Gracie, too, when I got here, but somehow—seeing you in that funny little room, arranging your flowers, looking so—I don't know quite how to put it—sweet, sort of, and natural—well, it made me feel better. Made me feel that after all I must just grin and bear things, see? And as she can't divorce me for what happened before last spring, and as I could go on oath she has had no grounds *since* then—well, I'll just have to let old Magwood arrange something. She wants a divorce, and she shall have it. Am I," he added, looking anxiously into her disturbed face, "*right*, Edith?"

"Yes, Charles"—her voice was very low, and she did not meet his gaze, "I think you are. Gracie has suffered terribly—and to think that I never knew a thing about it!—and she only gave in before because of Violet's illness— But for that—" she stopped short, biting her lips, and he nodded.

"I know. But Violet's all right now—Douglass-Harbord saw her in Cannes in September, did I tell you?—and he says she is going to be quite all right. Delicate, of course, but her heart is better, and her nerves are entirely different. She won't," he added, "*like* the divorce, but I'll write and explain things to her, and so long as she realizes that Gracie never could be happy with me— Edith—" his face and voice changed to their old look of bewildered misery, "don't you think it's *queer*, when I've been so—so different?"

"Not very queer, Charles. You've only known since April that she was unhappy, but according to what you've

told me she must have been wretched for many years. My opinion is that poor Gracie has borne as much as she *can* bear. And she must have been unhappy, too, ever since she got back from the yacht——”

“*Humph!* Well, I *wasn't*. I was trying damned hard to please her, and though some things seemed queer, I thought all she needed was a little more time, so I put up with it. I put up,” he went on, “with a good deal more than you’ve any idea of, too——”

“I’m sure you did, my dear,” was her hurried reply. His frankness could be so *very* devastating——

After a while he went on, still aggrieved, but more cheerful: “I used to think you and Gracie were a good deal alike, Edith, but I don’t know so much about that, now—— There’s a hard streak in Gracie—or not, not so much hard as icy. She can be infernally icy, and you couldn’t, I’m sure of that——”

It occurred to her that on the rebound he might begin once more to make love to her, and that she could not have endured. She loved the man, and if, later, he should want to marry her, she would gladly say yes, but as yet he had a wife, and she must not let him forget it.

“I’m afraid,” she said with a glance at the clock, “that I must send you away now, my dear. I’m lunching at the French Embassy, and I mustn’t be late——”

He said good-bye to her with a melancholy air that went to her heart, for she knew that he was feeling deserted by the whole world; that for the first time he now really felt orphaned and bereft.

‘Poor Charles,’ she thought as she dressed, ‘Grace is hard on him, but——’

Refusing to allow herself to think any longer about him, she set to work to add a touch of delicate colour to her soft, faded cheeks.

As to Beville, he naturally went straight to Clarges Street.

He found Lundy still in bed, ominous red patches glowing at the edges of his newly-trimmed beard.

"Hello," burst out Beville, "you've had your hair cut, and a bushel of hair chopped off your face! Makes you look better, too. How d'you feel to-day, old man?"

"Pretty well, thanks. Sit down. What's up, Charles?"

So again Charles Beville told his story. He told it fairly enough as regards the duke, and with scrupulous care in respect to his wife, but he was violently and without shame on his own side. His standpoint was simple: He had done his best, and he was being very badly treated, and he saw no reason for being less sorry for himself than he would have been for any other man in his position. And Lundy, who, like most people, theoretically despised self-pity, did him the justice of knowing that he would have been warmly and actively sorry for that hypothetical other man.

"I give you my word, Vincent," Beville went on, "that I've been as straight as a die ever since Violet's illness; s'good as *gold*, I've been——"

"I don't doubt it. Only—Gracie has *always* been as good as—rubies—and no doubt she can't forget that."

"Neither do I forget it. But you must make allowances for my being a man—a naturally pretty rotten man—and Gracie one of the best women who ever lived. Catch Gracie," he went on without thinking, "having a love-affair! Even one of these so-called innocent ones! If you ask me," he burst out virtuously, "once a man or a woman's married, there *isn't* such a thing as an innocent love-affair!"

Vincent Lundy was dying, and knew it, but at his friend's unconsciously preposterous observation his thin, pale lips stretched in an uncontrollable grimace of amusement. "*Dear* old Charles," he murmured, and Beville felt complimented. His capacity, his friend reflected, for feeling complimented, was really rather remarkable.

"It all seems a great pity, Charles—most unfortunate

that that poor little *détraquée* should have lost her head and come to the house. You can't wonder that Gracie was furious——"

"She wasn't half so furious as I was! Because, you see," Beville added with his most sapient air, "*Gracie* had nothing to be ashamed of!"

"And you had. I see. I really do see, Charles."

There was a pause, and then the sick man went on tentatively: "You know, my dear old friend, when a man's as near death as I am, he begins to see more clearly than he ever did before. Now don't say I'm *not* near death, because I am, and I know it, and if you aren't an utter idiot you know it, too! So let me go on."

Beville looked at him, his own eyes, those so deceptively interesting, handsome eyes, full of grief and tears, but he did not speak, for he knew that Vincent was really dying. He had not quite realized it before, but he did now.

"Well," Lundy continued after stifling a cough, "you know how I felt about Gracie. I felt so strongly about her that I behaved pretty badly—to you, not to her. I was perfectly loyal to you, of course, but when it came to the point I thought only of myself, and as I told you before, nothing on earth but Violet's illness could have made me give her up. People talk about love as if it were as common as breathing; as if everyone could love, which—perhaps luckily—is an idiotic error. Real love is as rare as——"

"As hen's teeth?" suggested Beville helpfully.

Lundy did not laugh. "If you like to put it that way. And I am one of the people who can—who *could*—really love. And I tell you, Charles—I tell you, who are incapable of it—it is agony. Agony——"

Beville would have protested in all sincerity that his friend was wrong; that he, Beville, had loved a hundred times; but something in his friend's face stopped his mouth.

"Gracie, as you know," continued Lundy, "would have married me, but she did not love me. She loved you. She has never loved anyone but you——"

"Now that," broke in Beville hotly, "*is* wrong! A man can't say very much about his wife, even when she's going to divorce him, but I can tell you that Gracie hasn't loved me for years! Why, she doesn't even like me!"

Lundy's faint laugh startled him. "*Mon pauvre* Charles, who said she liked you? Not I. I said—and I say—that she has never *loved* anyone but you. God knows why," he added with faint malice, "but it's true."

"Now we know," was Beville's dry comment, "why, after forgiving me, and promising to begin over, she is divorcing me who am now, *ipso facto*, an innocent man!"

The strangeness of the remark, coming from him, silenced the Frenchman, and Beville went on quietly: "Let's drop the subject, old man, shall we? Gracie wants a divorce and she shall have one, and that's that. Are you satisfied?"

"Satisfied? A difficult question, Charles. I should be glad to know that Gracie was happy—perhaps I shall know—but I doubt if she ever will be. For one thing, she has lived the greater part of her life at St. James's Place, and she will miss the house intolerably——"

"She needn't miss it. She may live there. *I* certainly shan't——"

"She'd never accept that offer, but—it's a very generous one, Charles."

Beville laughed shortly. "I'll be honest and tell you one thing, Vincent! I'd decided, before Violet's illness, *not* to let her go on living there, if she married *you*. I couldn't bear the idea of your living there! Mean, wasn't it? The thought of you sitting in my chair in the dining-room——"

A quick light flooded the sick man's sunken eyes, and he smiled with irrepressible pleasure. "*Tiens*," he cried, "a triumph for 'poor little Vincent'! You were jealous of me, after all!"

"*I wasn't*. It wasn't that a bit," contradicted Beville pig-headedly, "but never mind. Tell me why you think Gracie will not be happy even after she's got rid of me?"

I don't see why she shouldn't! She may very likely even marry again. She is," he added with conviction, "very good-looking still, particularly in the evening——"

Lundy shifted his head uneasily. "Is it," he asked, "very warm in here, or am I more feverish?"

"Oh, my dear old man, I'm afraid— I think it's a bit chilly, if anything——"

Lundy nodded: "I thought so." Then, after a pause, during which he coughed for several minutes, he closed his eyes.

"You'd better go now, old friend," he murmured weakly. "Come again to-morrow. You're a good fellow, Charles, in spite of everything, and I hope you *will* be happy. No, no—she won't marry again——" his voice trailed away—"but *you* will— Yes—you're sure to marry again, *mon vieux*——"

He was silent, and after listening for a moment to his laboured breathing, Beville without another word left the house.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

BEVILLE'S interview with his solicitor, two days later, was a very uncomfortable one, and the old man made no effort to mitigate its unpleasantness. He was, of course, extremely courteous, and equally of course he made no comments.

"Mr. Rivers," he said, "came to see me yesterday, and so far as I can see, there remains only one thing to be arranged."

"And what is that?" asked Beville, who knew perfectly well, but who wished to be as unpleasant as he could.

Mr. Magwood did not budge. He was, as usual, balancing his ivory paper-knife on one of his equally white old fingers, and for a moment seemed engrossed in making the balance perfect. "The matter of the intervener," he said in a colourless voice.

"My wife is divorcing me for adultery, I understand?"

"Quite so, Sir Charles." No sentimental reference this time to the day of the marriage settlements. 'I might be a perfect stranger,' thought his client irately, 'for all *he* cares——'

He was deeply hurt with Lady Grace, and he was indignant with her with the first enduring indignation of his life, but if she had let old Maggs believe that he had been guilty of some recent infidelity, old Maggs could go on believing it. *He* wasn't going to give Gracie away.

"I suppose," was all he did say, "she hasn't named—er—anyone in particular?"

"No. But she is quite sure that you will make no defence."

"She's right. Well, I suppose I may get along, now?"

"One moment, Sir Charles. There is, of course, the question of alimony——"

"Be damned to the alimony," Beville cried irritably. "She can have as much as she likes—or as the Duke of Ringborough likes—he's behind it all! Just draw up the papers, will you, and I'll sign 'em whenever you wish." Mr. Magwood bowed formally, touched the old-fashioned bronze bell on his desk, and just as Beville turned to the door, Miss Waterson came in—to his surprise, in deep mourning.

Rising, he held out his hand. "How do you do, Miss Waterson," he began, forgetting all about Mr. Magwood, "I am distressed to see that you are in mourning——"

"Oh, Sir Charles," was her broken reply, "of course, you didn't know. It's for poor Mums—only on Monday we buried her——"

Tears again filled her red-edged, globular eyes, and she dabbed at them with an already damp handkerchief.

"On Monday," he thought, "and this is only Saturday. God, what a lot of horrible things have happened this week——"

"I am *very* sorry," he murmured, "extremely sorry, and so will my wife—I mean to say— Was she ill long—Mrs. Waterson, I mean?"

"Only a few days—I— Oh, I *beg* your pardon, Mr. Magwood! You rang—please excuse me, Sir Charles——"

Mr. Magwood shook his head kindly enough. "Never mind now," he said; "you are quite naturally upset, and it's one o'clock already. Monday will do——"

Beville opened the door as she answered: "Oh, thank you *very* much, it *is* kind of you. I'll just pop into Lyon's and get a bite of food, and then—then I'm going to the cem—cemetery——"

Beville went slowly downstairs. Poor thing. She'd talked about her Mums and her Dad the night the baby was born! How heart-broken she looked—and how intolerably plain. 'Never saw such a nose in my life,' his thoughts went on; 'a *limb* of a nose——'

Chancery Lane was full of hurrying men and women rushing away for their half-holiday. It was a fair day for November, clear though with a nip in the air, and the sky was blue but for a few grey clouds like fat pigeons, that waddled slowly across its expanse. He had driven himself down in his two-seater, and it stood there at the kerb, a fleet and pleasant means of avoiding crowds. 'She'll take a bus to that cemetery,' he told himself, 'and it'll be jammed, and she'll be ashamed to cry, and if she takes flowers to the grave—and she will—they'll get all squashed— Oh, hell,' he decided, 'it's no good. I'll have to take her——'

And when a moment later Miss Waterson emerged from the old doorway that, Beville always thought, the young Charles Dickens must often have passed, she found him, most charming of all possible Prince Charmings, awaiting her with a fairy coach.

"I want to take you for a bit of lunch somewhere," he explained, again holding out his hand, "and then if you'll allow me, I'd like to drive you to the—er—the cemetery. It's pretty crowded for a lady," he added, "in buses, on a Saturday——"

Her conscience smote her as the car turned up Holborn; it wasn't *right* for a girl to be so happy on her way to her mother's only-a-week-old grave! Whatever would Mums think? And yet Mums, always, in life, so understanding, would be sure to understand *now*——

She let Beville assume that it was 'flu that had carried Mums off—for it didn't seem quite refined for a girl to mention gall-stones to a gentleman—and his sympathy was sincere and consoling.

He took his guest to a quiet hotel where the head-waiter understood at a glance, and led them to a secluded table, and for the first time in her life Mabel Waterson tasted caviare. It looked, she thought, like axle-grease, and, for all she knew, axle-grease might have exactly that fishy, not quite fresh taste, but it was caviare, and it had been offered

to her by the grandest waiter she had ever seen. 'I do hope,' she thought, 'it wasn't wrong of me to come— Oh, if only I could go home and tell Mums about it! She *would* enjoy it so——'

There was chicken, too, covered with a cream sauce incredibly unlike any cream sauce she had ever eaten, and there was a salad with celery, and orange, and banana, and a lot of other things in it, all as cold as ice.

But the chocolate sauce on the ice-cream was boiling hot, so hot that she burnt her tongue rather badly with it, though luckily the wine prevented the burn hurting much. No wonder all the toffs liked wine, if it was all as good as that!

Harry Benchester, whose sister-in-law lived at that hotel, came in for luncheon as Miss Waterson was being regaled, and after hesitating for a second, went on without speaking to his old friend, who had not seen him.

'What a queer chap old Charles is,' he reflected. 'Who in Heaven's name can she be? And why did he bring her *here*?'

That evening at the club, when one or two men were discussing the news of the divorce—Lady Olivia Chievely had confided in a friend, who had, of course, told her husband—Lord Benchester recalled his surprising rencontre at Nugent's, but he said nothing. 'Not even old Muffin,' he thought, 'could have been having a whirl with that red-nosed old hag in the awful crape hat——'

After luncheon Beville drove to a flower-shop, and leaving Miss Waterson in the car, went in. He was a frequent and valued customer there, for he liked making presents of flowers.

"Good day, sir," cried the elderly young lady who usually served him. "We've just got the *loveliest* lot of orchids in! And I've never seen such roses as have just come from our new place——"

"H'm!" answered Beville, "quite so. But as a matter

of fact, Miss Brown, I want some flowers for—for a dead person.”

“Dear me! Very sorry, I’m sure— A chaste wreath, perhaps? Or white roses? Or—if they are to go *into* the casket, I always think there’s nothing so elegant as lilies of the valley——”

“Well, I don’t quite know,” he explained. “They’re not for the—*er*—casket. To tell you the truth, the lady was buried on Monday, and I want flowers for her *grave*——”

Miss Brown understood, and presently he was followed to the car by a youth laden with large and carefully-pinned parcels, and a moment later Miss Waterson and her cavalier were headed for Brixton.

Miss Waterson had confounded herself with expressions of gratitude, and now they were going to Rosemary Crescent, so that she might just pop into the house and see if Dad was all right. “Poor Dad is so dreadfully despondent,” she said; “he took on something *tragic* at first, and even now he can hardly bear it— After all,” she added thoughtlessly, “it’s an awful thing for a gentleman to lose his wife——”

“It is indeed,” was Beville’s quiet answer. “Is this the house?”

“That’s right, Sir Charles. Number 183——”

As the car slowed down, the door of Number 183 opened, and an old man appeared; an old man who was not strictly sober, and who, as Miss Waterson nervously remarked, had forgotten his collar.

“Why, *Dad*,” she cried, “wherever are you off to? And you’ve forgotten your collar!”

Mr. Waterson looked at his daughter and began to weep. “I’m so lonely, Mabe,” he faltered; “so terribly lonely. Thought I’d just go up to the ‘Lamb and Anchor’ and ‘ave a game o’ billiards, mebbe——”

But she got out of the car and coaxed him to go back into his empty house. “Sir Charles Beville,” she explained,

very distinctly, "has given me a lot of flowers for—for the grave, dear, and we're going to pop up to the cemetery and arrange them there. They'll look a treat! And to-morrow morning, dear, you and me'll walk up, and you can see them——"

Dad was pitifully amenable, and on being given a bunch of Mums's lilies of the valley to put on her table near her work-basket, he went dutifully and resigned back into the house.

"He *does* miss her so," Miss Waterson said, her diction and grammar less careful than usual, as the car sped away from the dingy crescent. "He doesn't hardly ever take a drop, but I'm away all day, and one can't hardly blame him——"

"One can't blame him a bit," returned Beville grimly. "I assure you, Miss Waterson, that I've been half-inclined to do it myself, the last day or two——"

They decorated the raw-looking grave in silence, and then, still nearly without talking, he drove her back home.

"I can't thank you, Sir Charles," she said as they shook hands. "You are the kindest man I ever saw, and I feel ever so much happier that you should have got those lovely flowers for poor Mums——"

And he went his way pondering the poor soul's delicacy in never once having so much as hinted at his own trouble, all about which she of course knew. "That poor old chap called her Mabe," he reflected. '*Poor Mabe——*'

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Lady Grace Beville's petition for divorce was to be made as quickly as the necessary formalities allowed, but the Michaelmas term was, as usual, overcrowded with names of people seeking similar relief, and Mr. Magwood, and Mr. Rivers, Lady Grace's solicitor, saw no hope of the case coming on before the Hilary term, or possibly even later.

This was a relief to Beville, although he had resigned himself to the situation and even, by now, begun to see in it more of an unpleasant way to end an intolerable condition than a tragedy—his argument being that if Gracie didn't want him, he wasn't going to bother about *her*.

He had kept his word and been good, he had tried to like the things she liked—he had carefully waded through "Point Counterpoint" without understanding a word of it, and remaining to the end vague as to whether the name was Point Counterpoint or Count Pointercount; the only woman of whom he had seen anything was Edith Manisty, whom Gracie *really* couldn't mind—yet Gracie had not budged even when Uncle Cyprian told her the truth about Drusilla Battle. "She doesn't like me any more," Beville explained to his friends, "and she has a right to divorce me if she wants to."

He knew that everyone blamed him, and that at his clubs men chuckled over his being caught out at last, but though he craved sympathy he had his own idea of dignity and fair play, and not even to George Carstairs, that old and experienced friend, did he tell the story of his blameless half-year.

"Poor old Muffin," was the standard comment on his troubles, "he's had a pretty good run for his money, but she's got him cold now. I wonder who the woman is?"

Curiosity was all agog, but despite his easy-going ways, no one but Carstairs quite dared ask him.

And when old George did put the question, Beville looked down at him with a kind of lazy glare in his eyes, and told him to mind his own business.

"Oh, very well, Charles; just as you like, of course! Only—we are old friends, and you told me all about it *before*——"

"Yes, but I'm not telling you *this* time! If you live long enough and aren't shut up in an Idiot Asylum by January, you'll know. See?"

Lady Grace stayed in Manchester Square, seeing very few people, and going only to one or two of her oldest friends, and presently, when the doctors decided that Vincent Lundy was too ill to go to the South, as he had wished to do, Beville persuaded him to come to St. James's Place.

"It means a funeral from your house, Charles," the sick man protested with one of his macabre grins, but with tears in his eyes, and Charles rushed to the window and stood for a minute or two looking out at the rain.

He installed Vincent in the beautiful Blue Room, in which Lady Grace had told her tragedy to her father, and where the old diplomat had died a few weeks later.

It was a large room, nearly as long as the drawing-room, which was just below it, and its blue, discreetly manifest in the carpet and curtains, was that loveliest of all blues, the softer shade of delphiniums. Lundy loved it, and derived from its beauty and comfort more pleasure than even the hopeful Beville had anticipated. Galloping consumption, as old-fashioned people call it, is not a pleasant end to an energetic life, but it brings with it a mitigating and blurring fatigue, and the little Frenchman's last four weeks were not without happiness.

Every few days a French priest came to see him, and Beville knew that his friend had made his final peace with his God: *His Bon Dieu*.

One afternoon when Beville came in from a walk with Mrs. Tanq, a vaguely familiar scent met him in the hall.

"What's that smell, Domenico?" he asked, taking off his raincoat.

"*Signor mio*," answered the old man reverently, "it is incense. Father Carrère is administering the Blessed Sacrament to M. Lundy."

"Oh," said Beville, his face a little blank, and he went into the library and sat down, his dog at his feet; he would

have liked to go upstairs to Vincent, but he was too shy, and he sat there in the firelight, opposite the empty needle-point chair, until he heard the sound of subdued voices in the hall, and then the shutting of the front door.

The smell of incense somehow reminded him of a little old church he had visited in Rome on his wedding tour. Gracie had wanted to go there to see an altar-piece, and he could remember her, all in white, with large puffed sleeves, peering at the dark canvas through her lorgnon. He couldn't remember the picture, for he had not looked at it. He had been looking at Gracie. . . . Queer that after all those years she didn't like him any more. Despite his resignation, and in spite of his deep resentment against her, he could not get over this to him so strange thing: that she didn't like him any more.

'And I like her so much,' he thought mournfully. The world didn't seem much of a place to him, these days; Gracie divorcing him, Vincent dying, Violet not to live in England in the winter for years——

He had two consolations, however: Violet had taken the news well—it had had no effect on her health—and Edith Manisty.

"I am so sorry, darling," Violet had written him, "it is such a pity, and I know you are unhappy, poor father. And you *must* feel it unfair because you have done your best. But we must remember that mother gave in before *only* because I was so ill, and not because she wanted to. I saw that at Saucers, after you left, but I hoped things would turn out all right in time, because I *knew* you'd keep your promise, and because you are so sweet. But as she seems unable to forget, there's really no good in her *trying* to forgive, is there?"

"One either can or cannot forgive, I suppose. And I know that you want her to be happy, so cheer up, darling.

"As soon as the thing is over she is coming out to us

here for a month or so, and after that, will you come? About the end of February? We want you to stay a long time with us this time, and as soon as it gets too warm, we will go to the Greek Islands again, in the yacht—which Bob is going to buy—isn't that glorious? Miss Mary Ann sends her love to her handsome Granddad, and is longing to see him——”

Yes. Violet's attitude was a great comfort, he reflected, opening a window to let out the melancholy odour that had crept in under the door. He wasn't going to think of Gracie any more.

Then there was his other comfort: Edith. How kind she was, and how exquisitely tactful. That was her fine breeding. Those Socialist chaps could say what they liked about equality; it was just bunk. Blood *did* tell. Since that day when he had found her arranging flowers, Edith had not even in the most indirect way mentioned the divorce, or Gracie's name. She had just made him beautifully welcome, and let him talk about whatever he liked.

“And that,” he reflected, “is exactly the way *Gracie* would have behaved in Edith's place. Not that Gracie ever—*H'm!*”

Vincent seemed interested in Edith, by the way. Long ago he had painted her; one of his finest portraits it was, and the French Government had bought it for that new gallery. He had always admired her, and when she had come to see him the other day he had been glad to see her.

She had bought him a lot of French books and papers. . . .

‘I believe,’ Beville told himself, stroking Flannel Rag, ‘that Vincent thinks I'm going to *marry* Edith—Well—’ he rose and started upstairs, the cat still in his arms—‘a man might do a damn sight worse——’

.

Grace Beville had been several times to her former home to see her old friend. Each time Lady Olivia had rung up and asked Beville if it would be convenient if Lady Grace came at such and such an hour, and replying that it would, he had been each time careful to be out of the way when that hour came.

But one day just before Christmas Lundy had a bad hæmorrhage, and the doctor told Beville that it could now be only a question of a few days. Beville nodded without a word, and went back to the Blue Room.

The bed-linen had been renewed and Lundy lay there looking already dead, but on hearing his friend, opened his eyes and tried to smile. "Nurse is ringing up Father Carrère, Charles," he said, "and I should like to see Gracie once more."

"Right. I'll go and ring up Olivia." Beville stood very stiffly by the bed, his hands clenched in his jacket pockets. Then suddenly he bent down quickly and kissed his old friend's forehead, and bolted out of the room.

"He's dying, John," he said to the footman. "Send Domenico to me in the library."

"He's dying, Domenico," he repeated a moment later, and the old Italian crossed himself. "God and Our Lady grant him an easy death," he replied.

"Yes. Ring up his Grace's house and ask for Lady Olivia. Then," he swallowed hard, "I'll come——"

But Lady Olivia Chievely was out, and it was his wife's voice that he heard.

"Gracie," he stammered, "he's d-dying. Can you come?"

There was a pause, and then she answered quietly: "I will come at once, Charles."

That was all. Not a word of regret; not a thought for his, Charles's, unhappiness. 'Icy,' he thought, 'that's what she is, icy——'

He went back to the sick-room and told Lundy that Gracie was on her way.

"Thanks, Charles. You've been very good to me, my dear—" He could hardly hear the weak, hollow voice. "I love you very much," it went on. "I want you to be happy. You're a young man yet—you are sure to marry——"

"Oh, Vincent! Listen. It's you who've been good to me, old man! You're so clever, such a fine artist, and I was always a fool. We *have* had some good times together, haven't we?" Tears were streaming down his face, and he did not wipe them away.

"*Dear Charles——*"

"I must go now—she'd hate to see me—" The two men shook hands. Beville rose. "I shall never forget you, Vincent," he went on. "*Never—I love you, too——*"

He went up to Violet's room, and there he stayed until Domenico came in and told him that Lady Grace had gone.

Lundy died the next day.

It rained the day of the funeral, and Beville was glad. To his surprise, Lundy's only remaining relative, a very old woman from the Limousin, had answered his telegram by arriving unannounced, twenty-four hours later.

Mademoiselle Coing was a fat old lady with a vague resemblance to her dead nephew, and, to Beville's horror, a strong, unspoken disapproval of his having ever existed.

"My father," she explained woodenly, "never forgave my sister Marie. She was a great singer, but she disregarded the laws of God and man, and I never saw her after we heard about it——"

"B-but you were kind to Vincent," answered Beville.

"*Ce pauvre enfant!* Ah, yes, he came to me sometimes for his holidays—his mother died when he was nine—and I did what I could. I saw that he was confirmed."

"He was a very devout Catholic——"

"*Tiens!* I did not know. I am glad——"

Beville detested her, but for Vincent's sake he did all he could for her, giving her a pleasant, sunny bedroom, and escorting her to Father Carrère's gay little church in Soho for early Mass.

And at the funeral he took her with him in his car. Only a few people stood at the graveside in the pouring rain. Lady Grace was there with her solicitor—Beville was glad she had come, but he did not approach her—Sergeant Swallow, the caretaker of the Spate Street studios, a French chemist with whom the dead man had occasionally played chess at a café in Greek Street, Edith Manisty, Mademoiselle Coing, and himself, and one other person—a woman whom at first he did not recognize.

As he left the cemetery, however, Mademoiselle Coing clinging to his arm, the stranger raised her veil, and he was touched to see that she was Miss Waterson.

"How kind of you to come," he said, shaking hands with her, and her tear-sodden face turned even redder. "Oh, no, Sir Charles," she cried. "I was *delighted*—I mean—tersay—I knew you were so fond of him, and you were so kind about poor Mums's grave—Dad took the liberty," she added, "of sending you his respectful sympathy——"

The drive home seemed interminable. Mademoiselle Coing told her beads all the way, her flabby lips mumbling in an undertone. Beville wished he could like her.

But when they had reached St. James's Place he liked her less than ever, for as soon as she had taken off her wet veil and hat, she turned and asked him how much money her nephew had left.

"I really haven't the slightest idea," he answered indignantly.

"That," she returned with unconcealed suspicion, "strikes me as strange."

Beville loathed her. So *that* was why she had come!

He gave her a letter to Lundy's solicitor, sat through an

endless dinner with her—she enjoyed her food in an unpleasing way—and then, excusing himself on the score of an unbreakable engagement, rushed off to Lady Manisty.

She was expecting him, though he did not know it, and by her fireside he found consolation and a certain undefined hopefulness.

He had always loved an open fire with a quiet lady sitting by it, and here was an open fire and a lady who, as well as being quiet, possessed a warmth and understanding that of late years had not been given to him.

She was not exactly beautiful, and he preferred Gracie's long, sad nose to her short one, but she was a very satisfactory eyeful. An old-fashioned book he had somewhere read had had a heroine who possessed "as much countenance as beauty". And Edith had great countenance.

As he sat there, wordlessly cherished, openly pampered, a warmth and comfort that derived less from the fire than from his friend's affection, crept into the man's lonely heart, and he gave a deep sigh of relief.

And at the sound Lady Manisty flushed a little, though she said nothing.

He sat there till very late, dreading the emptiness and memories of his house; hating the idea of seeing Mademoiselle Coing in the morning.

"She is," he added to his description of his guest, "a horrible old woman, though I shouldn't say so! I don't believe poor Vincent cared a bit for her, and she quite obviously came over *only* to see what she could get——"

"Well, my dear, she's going to-morrow——"

At last he rose and took her hands in his. "Good night, dear," he said, "you've been awfully good to me——" and stooping a little, he kissed her gently on the forehead.

"Good night, Charles——" That was all.

The sky had cleared, and a busy little wind was fanning

the stars. Unconsciously he had always followed the advice of the philosopher who told men never to forsake the future for the past, and as he walked slowly home the misery of Gracie's desertion and the acute pain of Lundy's death began to lessen a little. He felt less weary, and indefinitely solaced. He would see Edith to-morrow, too.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

EARLY in January Beville received a letter that stirred and upset him. It was from Dora Meakin—Mrs. Beale.

“Dear Charles” [this lady wrote in a big, unformed, honest hand], “I have a bit of news for you, and I hope you’ll be glad. I’m going to be married. To Mr. Walmsley, of course. I’ve been thinking about it for a long time, he’s been fond of me for many years, as you will remember, and now that the boys are so comfortably settled I don’t see why I shouldn’t.

“They have always been very fond of him, and he’s kind and generous, and will be good to them. We are to be married the sixth of January, in the Parish Church. I’ve known the Vicar, Mr. Pye, for the past five years—we have a pew at St. George’s—and he knows all about me. About the boys and their father, I mean, and says he will be glad to marry Albert and me.

“And now I’ve a favour to ask of you, Charles. Will you come to the wedding and then to the breakfast? You see, the boys do know now, Ruby told Charlie after she saw you. Her uncle is a butler at a Mrs. Leigh Tyndal’s house who knows you. Anyhow, they know, and things were a bit unpleasant for a while.

“I quieted them down, though, by telling them it was *me* wouldn’t marry *you*, as I knew I wasn’t fit for a real gentleman’s wife, particularly to be ‘my lady’, and it wasn’t a very bad lie, dear, for even if you *had* asked me, I’m sure I’d have had enough sense to say no.

“Anyhow, they don’t mind so much now, as I said to them, you can see for yourself, boys, that your father has always been a good friend to us all. And I know they would like you to come to the wedding if you wouldn’t

mind. Their calling you their guardian will make your coming seem quite natural, I think. But don't come if you don't want to. I mean, I don't want you to think you *ought* to. I've told Albert I'm asking you, and he says he would be glad to have you come. He says he's always liked you since the boys had pneumonia and you were so good to them. Will you send me a line? The wedding is at 11.30 at St. George's Church. I know you will be pleased that I have accepted Albert. He is very nice, and quite the gentleman as we say. Yours, DORA."

For a long time, Beville sat considering this letter and thinking of things half-forgotten that it had recalled to his mind. What a good woman poor Dora had always been! How grateful for the slightest kindness, what a devoted and tireless mother to his sons. How he had longed for a son of Gracie's . . . So the boys knew. That horrible Ruby had, of course, got it from old Burton, Mark Leigh Tyndal's red-headed butler. Pauline Tyndal *would* discuss her friends' private affairs before her servants!—

'Wonder what I'd better do?' his thoughts went on. 'Shall I say anything about it to the boys? Boys! They're both older than Violet! Hell, what an ass I should look, putting my hand on their shoulders and saying: "Boys, I am your father"— Or perhaps they'll come and ask me why I didn't marry their mother?— No they won't she's made *that* all right; taken the blame on herself. Poor dear old Dora! I must give her a really worth-while present. Not a cheque—what about a canteen of silver? Only perhaps Albert might not like that. Depends on what his house is like, too, of course. Well,' he rose, 'I'll go along to the G. and S. Company and perhaps I'll see exactly the right thing. Mr. Martin will advise me.'

He wished the wedding was not to be on the sixth, for that was to be a busy day—or rather evening—for him.

Lundy's death had postponed Lady Grace's petition until too late for the over-full Hilary list, but he had been told

that his night with the obliging lady provided by Mr. Magwood must be spent at once, so that the petition could be filed immediately afterwards. And now, taking his notebook from his pocket, he found the note he had made. "Jan. —, 10.30 p.m. Hotel —. Miss Gloria Cavendish."

He laughed as he marched along with the slavish Mrs. Tanq's nose at his heels. 'Cavendish—the likes of her! Hell, what a dirty business. And Gracie—my Gracie, to let me in for it— Well, that's that. In the morning I go to the wedding of a Putney draper and a woman I once loved—and I *did* love Dora, too, when I was—how old was I when Harold was born? Let's see, I was—yes, I was twenty-six— Yes, her wedding to a pot-bellied but worthy draper, I being the wicked baronet of servant hall novelettes, and to-night I pretend to commit adultery with a woman I've never seen or heard of, to satisfy the British ideas of justice. And in a few months I'll have no wife! I almost wish she could have done it the *first* time, and married poor Vincent. He might not have died if he'd been happy . . .' He did not know that only Vincent's being dead enabled him to contemplate, without furious jealousy, the idea of his being Gracie's husband.

He had rung up Edith Manisty, and asked her to meet him in Regent Street to help him choose Dora's wedding-present, and as he saw nothing incongruous in such a suggestion, he was a little hurt when she refused to carry it out.

'Queer of Edith not to come,' he pondered, as he wandered helplessly round the great shop, inspecting and rejecting one expensive object after the other. 'I'll go and see her this afternoon, and tell her how unkind she was not to come——'

He finally chose for Mrs. Beale a very beautiful silver tea and coffee service, and much pleased with his choice, went to the club and wrote her a cordial letter of congratulation, accepting her invitation.

"It doesn't matter a bit" [he wrote], "about the boys

knowing, and perhaps it will make us better friends than we have ever been. I'll have a little talk with them before long! How would Harold like Ceylon, I wonder? I have a friend who wants a clever and nice young fellow to go out with him as a kind of partner-overseer, and I think I could get the job for him. But we shall see. I'll be at the church, dear Dora, in my best big and tucker, and I'm sure it will be a beautiful wedding. Once more, my love and very best wishes to you, and my congratulations to Mr. Walmsley, and I am your sincere friend—Charles Beville."

The wedding was pleasanter than he had expected, the bride looked extremely handsome, like a Roman matron, Beville considered, rather vaguely, of Julius Cæsar's day, and the bridegroom, dressed by a very good second-class tailor, was a good specimen of self-respecting British tradesmen. His bald head grew very red and extremely glossy as the ceremony went on, but he came through it manfully. His best man was Harold, while the elder boy gave his mother away.

Handsome boys, both of them, and Beville wondered just what it was that showed them to be not quite gentlemen. It was not their clothes, for he had sent each of them a cheque, with a good tailor's address, so their clothes were right, and neither of them had more of the Cockney unsteadiness of vowel than had many of their father's racing acquaintances of his own rank. Yet there was something— He hoped that Dora did not know it, but Dora was shrewd, and probably did.

He drove back to The Lilacs with the boys and a girl-friend of theirs—Essie somebody—whose presence was very welcome to him.

The house was gay and fragrant with flowers, most of which Beville had sent the day before, and the breakfast party was more enjoyable than any he had been to for a long time, as everyone was sincerely enjoying it.

There was a splendid cake, the food, from a local

caterer's, simple but excellent, and Mr. and Mrs. Albert Walmsley looked justified in anticipating a happy life together.

Beville sat between the bride and a Mrs. Peters, a friend of the bridegroom, and as she reminded him a good deal of dear old Nanny, he enjoyed talking to her, though her upper teeth did stick in the harder concomitants of the meal, and drop alarmingly when she laughed——

"Good-bye, Dora," he said affectionately, two hours later, as the newly-married couple left for their honeymoon in Penzance, "and the best of luck. Good-bye, Mr. Walmsley, and every happiness to you."

"Good-bye, Sir Charles——"

"Good-bye, sir—a pleasure to see you, I'm sure——" And they were gone.

Beville suddenly felt absurdly bereft. He had seen increasingly less of Dora Meakin and her boys, as time had gone on, but she had *been there*. He had replaced her not only in the conclusive way of marriage, but by a long sequence of small adventures, yet he now knew, as he stood there in the smilax and carnation-decked passage, staring after the disappearing motor-car, that until that day she had in reality been his.

And now she was no longer his. She belonged to her Albert—what a horrible name Albert was!— He could no longer find her, his kind and humble friend, when he felt inclined to see her, in the house of which she was so proud. Henceforth she was to live at Palermo Villa, up the road, and thither he could go only if invited. It was, he told himself, humourlessly, a loss, a real loss, and with a little shake of his head he went back into the little drawing-room in search of the boys, with whom he had decided he ought to have a little talk.

He found that Charlie had gone off with the pretty Essie, but Harold was still there, evidently waiting for him, and after making rather elaborate adieux to the few guests, he followed him into the back garden.

A desolate enough spot now, in January, but the ground was dry, and the day mild.

The two men walked to the end of the little enclosure, and stood still, looking at a grey cat who sat in the faint sunlight, licking her fur.

"Well, Harold," Beville began, slowly, "so you *know*?"

"Yes, I know." They eyed each other cautiously, and Beville was relieved to note that there was no rancour in his son's face. "I was upset at first. Worse than Charlie, somehow, but then mother told us about—about things," the younger man went on. "It wasn't exactly pleasant in one way, of course, but—I've no right to be angry so long as *she* wasn't, and you have been very good to us——"

This generosity touched the father in Beville as nothing in his son had ever before touched him, and he held out his hand impulsively. "That's jolly nice of you," he cried. "Your mother has always been a wonderful woman, wise and honourable, and I'm glad to see that you are like her."

Harold bit his lip—a dark-red, bloomy lip, like Dora's—and gave his father's hand a strong grip. "You're right, sir," he agreed, "Mum's *fine*. And—though these things don't matter so much as they used to, I have felt it a bit, but I can't help being glad that I'm partly a gentleman——"

Beville wanted to cry. "My dear *boy*," he cried. "You and I are going to be great friends, I can see that! You stick to being like your mother, but—be a little fond of me if you can—will you?"

Harold Beale was twenty-six years younger than his father, but there was in him none of his father's eternal little-boyhood, and now he felt older, and far more worldly than the elder man. "I'll be very fond of you, sir," he said, "if you'll let me——"

The names father and son were not uttered between them, and each of them was shyly grateful to the other for his abstention. Charles would have been embarrassed if

the young man had called him father, and the older man would, by calling the younger one son, have come perilously near what youth so detests—probably because it fears it—sentimentality. They parted at the gate unemotionally enough, but each felt that he had found—gained—something, and for this something both were grateful to Dora——

Beville walked home, for he was at a loose end, and had nowhere in particular to go. Edith Manisty had gone to Paris, and was to be there until after the hearing of the divorce case, and as he had to spend that night with Miss Gloria Cavendish, he did not know what to do, or where to go, until half-past ten.

He had taken his dressing-case to the club that morning, and, he reflected, would probably not be able to do better than dine at the club and then walk to that confounded hotel. He could send the dressing-case on ahead of him, by taxi.

It was, of course, wise of Edith to go to Paris, but he missed her tremendously. If Dora had still been Mrs. Beale he would probably have gone to her for comfort, but as it was—where could he go for the rest of the day?

Then he began to think of his son. Of his sons. To think that he had never had a son by Gracie. No son could have been so *dear* as Violet, yet somehow a man's *son*—Still, he had never really cared much for poor Dora's boys, and now he wondered why. Was it because they weren't legally his?

'No good thinking about it. I'll be kinder to them in the future. Harold said he'd like that job at Ceylon, and I'll manage to get it for him, somehow—I must look up Pinsent— And Charlie wants that electrical engineering course, and he shall have it. I wish to God Dora had let me know *before* that he wanted it! Oh, well—' His thoughts reverted to the horrible night before him, and his pleasant mood changed to the old one of worry and resentment. 'That house,' he thought, 'will be plain

Hell without Gracie. It isn't *fair* of her, when I was being so good——'

At the club he came across Harry Benchester in a mood of the deepest depression, for he had just come from Monte Carlo where he had, he informed Beville gloomily, dropped a pot of money. "Everything going to blazes, too," Benchester went on, "and I'm going to have to sell Ullsworthy. Damn these blighters, with their taxation. Waiter, bring me another whisky-and-soda. Have one, Charles, you look pretty blue yourself——"

Beville had one.

Benchester was not drunk, but his barriers were down, and presently he asked Beville outright about the divorce.

"I'm damned sorry for you, Muffin," he said. "I'm not saying you've been a saint, old man, but you're a damn good fellow——"

Beville grunted. "I only hope," pursued Benchester, setting down his glass, "that the lady is worth while?"

"Let's not talk about it, Harry——" Beville liked Harry Benchester, and he was longing for sympathy, but Benchester was a drinking man, and hence indiscreet. Besides, it was less a man's than a woman's sympathy for which Beville felt the need.

"There isn't any lady," he added, taking, what was unusual for him, a second drink.

"No lady?" the other man repeated, just over the edge into owliness, and trying to be waggish. "Try again, old lad, that's a *bad* one——"

"Well, I mean to say that there isn't any particular one."

Benchester crowed with laughter. "'No particular one!' Lady Grace Beville versus Ladies in General, *ha, ha!*"

Beville rose. "You're an awful ass, Harry," he said, "and I've got to go. So long——"

It was nearly five, and the streets were already lighted as he left the club. The whisky had gone to his head, for he had had champagne at the breakfast, and things

looked and felt a trifle unreal to him. 'Where the hell,' he asked himself vaguely, 'shall I go? Edith's away, I don't want to see Quincy, and God knows I don't want to see Drusilla—poor little Drusilla! No, I don't want to see her. Marjorie Alanson and Fred are at Cannes, and Barbara—no, not Barbara——'

He turned into Piccadilly and marched along eastward, with no destination in view, but finding a certain pleasure in the sharp autumn air.

And opposite the Piccadilly Hotel he met Fifi Deschamps.

"But, Charles," cried the plump little woman—of the French partridge type was Mademoiselle Deschamps—"Quelle bonne aubaine! How glad I am to see you!"

And how glad he was to see her. Dear old Fifi, always so cheery and contented, and such a good friend!

"Fifi, my dear, this is *indeed* a good harvest! I'm having a perfectly rotten time, and it'll do me a world of good to tell you about it——"

Her brightly lacquered black eyes looked at him shrewdly for a moment.

"Come along home with me," she answered, "and I'll make coffee, and we will have a good talk—I was going to Chelsea to see a friend, but she can wait——"

Turning, they went on to the Circus, across which the brisk little woman led her old acquaintance with a brilliant and effective disregard of danger, and along Shaftesbury Avenue.

Here, between a foreign chemist's shop and one devoted to silk stockings, they mounted a long, narrow staircase, and at the top Mademoiselle Deschamps whipped out a latchkey and opened a door.

"*Nous voici,*" she exclaimed, gaily, "*au Château Fifi!*"

Château Fifi consisted of a large bed-sitting-room, a kitchen, and a bathroom. It was small, but every inch of it was cleverly made use of, and it was clean with elbow-grease, Ronuk, and good French wax. It shone with

cleanliness, even its muslin window-curtains being stiff with starch, and as white as country snow.

The bed was a real bed with a wooden head and foot to it, but it was hidden behind a tall and solid Japanese screen whereon clambered apes that looked human, and men and women who looked ape-like. A screen, Beville had once remarked, to make anyone believe in Darwin. On a green and varnished three-tier stand in one of the two shining windows, stood a dozen pot-plants; scented geranium, lemon-verbena, mignonette, and pansies, each leaf and blossom of which seemed just to have come in from a rainy garden, and in the other window, in a glittering cage, sat two love-birds.

A carefully banked up coal fire burnt in the basket-grate, and before it lay a large grey cat, thrumming sociably to himself. This was M. Clémenceau, sometimes called Tiger.

Beville sat down in a deep and comfortable armchair, and stretched his legs towards the fire. How fortunate that he had run across Fifi! The very person he needed. And she was glad to see him, too. Fond of him, Fifi was, and he'd always liked her, though of course a fellow couldn't exactly *approve* of her——

A little older she'd grown since he saw her two or three years ago; a little plumper as to bosom and hips, in the French way, but how well she looked. 'The brightest eyes I ever saw,' he mused, 'like marbles. I believe she takes 'em out at night and washes them, and polishes them with wash-leather——'

On the wall hung two hideous crayon enlargements of old photographs; Fifi's father and mother; and there was the old photograph of the Arles amphitheatre, and the coloured print of the Piazza San Marco, at Venice.

Her bookcase, too, was in its old place, he noticed, and seemed to contain only the same old books. Zola's *Bonheur des Dames*, *La Cousine Bette*, two tattered volumes of Richard O'Monroy, the little red dictionary,

Les Trois Mousquetaires, and the thin, tall, unreal-looking books bound in shiny green or red cloth; books that looked like thin slabs of some concrete substance, as do old-fashioned French books of a certain type.

And in the old yellow basket was the usual pile of tightly rolled silk stockings waiting to be mended.

Beville had known Fifi Deschamps for over ten years, and so far as he could see, her room had not changed any more than she herself had grown an extra nose or ear. She and the room were both a little older, and that was all.

Presently the homely and delicious smell of coffee came in from the kitchen, and Beville's comfort was complete.

"*Voilà! Now that,*" his hostess added, bustling in with a coffee service on a glittering tray that he remembered, "will do you *good!*"

"Oh! So you noticed I'd been having whisky? Well, my dear, it's a thing I almost never do, and when I've told you what's been happening, I don't believe you'll blame me much for doing it to-day——"

She nodded. "Oh, I shan't blame you, *mon cher!* Now eat that *croissant* while it's hot. I'll mend my stockings as you do so——"

Her English was charming, and her voice unusually sweet for a Frenchwoman.

He liked her. How he liked her as she sat darning her grey stockings. An open fire, a lady sewing—or knitting—He sighed as he drank his coffee, and when he had finished it, and she had whisked the tray away into the kitchen, he settled himself comfortable, lit a cigarette, and told her his story.

He had told that story, in varying degrees, and in various ways, to Lundy, to Mrs. Paull, to Lady Manisty, to George Carstairs, to Dora Beale, and even to Drusilla Battle, and to each he had told if not the whole truth, at least the truth up to a different point. But to Fifi Deschamps, superficially the least suited confidante—barring Drusilla—of them all, he told nearly the whole truth, for she could be

by the recital neither hurt nor in any way encouraged to his disadvantage. She was so completely outside his life that he need spare neither her nor himself. Naturally, he said as little as possible about his wife, but he did not conceal from his strange confidante the incident of her short-lived intention to marry Vincent Lundy, and so well did he know his hearer that he felt no guilt, no indelicacy in telling her this.

"My wife," he said, "is the finest woman in the world, and she has been as patient as an angel with me, Fifi——"

"*Je veux bien le croire,*" was her dry response, and he went on.

"So now she's fed up, and no wonder, and her uncle is backing her for all he's worth—he never liked me—and there's nothing more to be done."

"I see. And—it's for to-night?" As she spoke she dabbed at the stretched silk of a beige stocking with her needle, very thoughtfully, and he nodded, his face again full of gloom. "Yes. Isn't it a disgusting business, Fifi?"

"Yes. It's horrid. I know one of those poor women—*c'est un veritable métier, vous savez*—a recognized job. Invented by the lawyers, of course—" She was rolling her Rs more strongly than usual, as she always did when very much in earnest.

"Well," she added after a pause. "You'll live through it, my friend. A night is short. You might play patience."

They both laughed, and then suddenly laying her stocking in the basket and taking off her thimble, she began to talk.

"Charles," she said, her bright, irregular face very grave, "I blame you very much. *Attendez! Laissez-moi parler.* Very much I blame you. There you were, a young man with everything in the world a man needs for 'appiness; good looks, health, much money, a charming and *vertueuse* wife, and a daughter you adored. Oh yes, I remember that, too! And could you be've yourself,

and be a decent ceetizen? You could not. You must run after women—or what is much worse, let them run after you *and catch you*—You had to be petted and spoilt—you had to be the *enfant gâté* of all your world. And you were so stupid, so *bête*—as to think your wife did not know! Ah yes, my poor friend, you were stupid like a plum-tree——”

Beville stared at her, but did not speak, and she went on with an emphatic little nod.

“And you broke your wife’s heart. Oh, I go *parfois* to the Old Veek, and I know your Shakespeare said that men have died and been devoured by worms but nevaire for love, but Shakespeare did not know. People *do* die of love. I had a little sister—*mais n’importe*. People can die of love, and ’earts do break. You think it *drôle*, hein? that I should say these things? Never mind that; I know. You broke your wife’s heart because you were a fool, a fool, a fool!”

“Do you think I don’t know that? But what’s the use of rubbing it in?”

“Ah bah, ‘robbing it in’! Should I say as those others do ‘my poor darrrling, ’ow bad you are treated?’ *Pas moi!*” Losing her grip on English she continued in French, and Beville sat listening to her in silence.

“And all those women,” she said, “did you love them? No. Did you *think* you loved them? No. Not even that. Then why did you do it? Why did you behave so idiotically? Why could you not be happy in your beautiful home, with your so admirable wife? Oh——” she made a large gesture, “I don’t say why were you not absolutely faithful to her, because you are a man, and men are not saints. A mistress—or even two—in so many years, would have been excusable, but—what were all those women to you? Oh, I don’t mean me; I don’t count. But those others? What were they?”

Suddenly her face changed, a subtle, amused smile dawning on her narrow lips, and she rose. “Charles,”

she asked, "'ave you ever read *Le Chat Botté*? 'Pooss-in-Boots'?"

"Puss-in-Boots? Of course I have—when I was a child. But why? What has Puss-in-Boots got to do with me?"

She laughed excitedly, and passing him, squatted down by the book-case and searched for a moment amongst the stony-looking little books on the bottom shelf.

"*Voilà!* I have it——"

She sat down again in her chair, and hurriedly turned the gilt-edged, thin pages, her eyes dancing. "Ah," she cried, "'ere it is! Listen to this——"

And slowly she read, translating the words into English.

"'And why, O Pooss, do you kill these poor mice?' and Pooss replied: 'I kill mice for amusement.' There you are, my poor Sair Charles Beville! You are Pooss-in-Boots, and these ladies are mice. You kill mice for amusement!"

"*Humph!* You're a queer woman, Fifi, but—I see what you mean. Perhaps I'm not quite such a fool as you think, but——"

"But they are all mice! No, you have no excuse, my dear. No excuse at all," she insisted, as he rose. "You have not even the modern one of being over-sexed! You are just a poor, naughty, very sweet—*Pooss!*"

"That's the first time," he retorted as he rose, and trying to laugh, "that I've been called a puss, but I see what you mean. Good-bye, Fifi, and—thanks. No one makes coffee like yours—It's nearly eight, and I must go—Good-bye, my dear——"

They shook hands, her face rather sad. "Do not be angry with me," she said, "I like you so much. You have always treated me as if I were—what I am not. I hope you may be happy, Charles."

"Thanks, Fifi. I like you, too," he answered sincerely, "and I'm not a bit angry——"

But as he went back to the club for dinner, he kept repeating: 'Puss-in-Boots. That's what I am, a damn silly old Puss-in-Boots——'

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

AS he ate his dinner that night alone at the Berkeley Grill-room—for the presence at the club of Derek Babbacombe and the over-sociable George had driven him forth from those familiar halls—it occurred to Beville that it was Twelfth Night. 'A nice jolly Twelfth Night for me,' he mused grimly in his corner; 'not much like the one in Rome when Gracie and I were engaged——'

For on that long ago night of the Three Kings he and his fiancée had gone out into the crowded streets of Rome and wandered about for hours, enjoying the merriment, and the hideous clamour of the long glass horns blown by everyone in celebration of Balthazar, Melchior and Gaspar.

In the Piazza Navona, where the great Napoleon established his mother in one of the city's most splendid palaces, the throng was at its densest, round the great fountain, and Beville could remember his pride in his size and strength as he protected the fragile girl from over-close jostling, and how confidently she had clung to his arm.

That had been a Twelfth Night full of beauty and romance, and now, a quarter of a century later, he was to celebrate the festival by spending it at an hotel with Miss Gloria Cavendish.

For once he barely noticed what he was eating, to the suave and capable French head-waiter's distress.

'She has no right to do it to me,' he reflected, with the cold anger that was so foreign to him, and which, notwithstanding his recurrent and characteristic relapses into remorse and temporary forgiveness, had, since his interview with the duke, remained like a dark sediment in his mind.

'Her beginning over was nothing but a farce, and she never forgave me at all——'

He was so astoundingly lonely, he who had never been lonely before. If only Vincent were alive they would be together now, for though Vincent had been quite frank in blaming him, and "siding" with Gracie, he would never have let his old friend eat that miserable dinner alone. But Vincent was dead.

Vincent was dead, and Edith was in Paris, and seemed nearly as far away as he.

It was nearly ten o'clock, and the beautiful room was nearly empty but for the waiters. At a neighbouring table sat a party of four, one of whom vaguely resembled Edith Manisty. Dear Edith, how kind she was, and how tactful, and how fond he was of her. For some time there had hovered near him the idea of his ultimately marrying this so comforting and admirable friend, and now, as he drank his coffee he for the first time actually considered the step.

'I'll be so damn lonely,' he thought, 'and she's so—so *nice*—and she's fond of me, too. I couldn't bear living all alone, and it's no good my marrying anyone *young*. Fifty-three in February; getting on. 'An old man,' Violet said in her letter! That's absurd, of course, but still—' Of late he had felt distinctly less young, less resilient, somehow. And his house was so big——

'Edith's the only woman,' his thoughts went on as he went out into the cold, damp night, 'whom I could bear to have sitting there in Gracie's old chair——'

A pang of pain that seemed nearly physical, smote him at the thought of that chair with no Gracie in it.

'Poor old Vincent said I didn't know how to love,' he told himself, 'and perhaps I don't—certainly I never went mad over a woman the way he did over Grace, and Ned Loring over that awful Spanish woman—bah, how she stank of garlic! But I loved Gracie in my own way. And more than anyone ever knew, too——'

It was a long way to the hotel, whither a messenger boy had taken his dressing-case, but it seemed a very short walk

to him. His adventures had been many and varied, but he was utterly shocked by the prospect of the night before him. It seemed more terrible than anything he had ever undergone; a vile and degrading thing.

'I'll just read that Edgar Wallace book all night, and not speak a word,' he decided. 'I suppose they've had the sense to pick out a—comparatively decent one——'

When he went into the huge brick-and-gold coloured hall, he was suddenly shyer than he had ever been in his life.

"I've ordered a room," he mumbled to the clerk, "Sir Charles Beville——"

"Quite so, Sir Charles. Number 289——" The beautifully dressed young man suppressed a smile. "Your luggage is already there, and—*er*—Lady Beville arrived some time ago——"

Beville went a sudden, hot red; he had not known that this must be done; that Gracie's name was to be so desecrated. For a moment he was on the verge of some shattering indiscretion, but just in time he controlled himself, and without a word followed a very small page to the lift.

If Gracie could bear it, was his furious and haughty thought, *he* could——

"Turning a bit caolder, sir," commented the page—who was nearly nineteen—with professional brightness, and Beville grunted an affirmative.

The lad stopped at No. 289, and pointed to it. "Lady's inside, sir," he said with a grin, and Beville, pretending to look for something in his pocket, waited until he had gone, and then knocked.

He was, as has been seen, a man who had in his life knocked—or not knocked—at a great many midnight doors, but never before had he been so shaken, so embarrassed, as he was now, and when a voice called out "come in", he literally nearly turned and fled.

But after a moment he opened the door, and went in to

a large firelit room where, by the hearth, her back to him, sat a woman; the woman ostensibly because of whom he was to be divorced.

"Er—good evening," he said awkwardly.

To his surprise she did not rise or even turn, and then with a pang he heard the faintest of clicking sounds, and something seemed to swell in his throat.

She was knitting.

For a moment he stood there, heartsick and somehow outraged, as his eyes unconsciously explored the place where he was to stay till morning.

It was a large, very high room, papered and upholstered in Pompeian red and grimy gold; to his left stood a big bed, to his right a kind of sideboard, and on the round table in the middle was the light supper he had been told to order; different kinds of sandwiches, a cold fowl, a bowl of salad, and a bottle of champagne in a bucket of ice. And he hated iced champagne.

Neatly folded on one of the chairs he saw a dark coat, and a very queer, high-crowned, beflowered hat.

His dressing-case was on another chair, and through an open door he saw the end of a gleaming porcelain bathtub.

Only the soft noises of the fire and the click of the knitting-needles broke the silence, and when he put down his hat and stick and gave a little cough, it sounded to him like an explosion. 'Don't they,' he wondered wrathfully, 'ever *speak*?'

"Er—good evening," he then began politely, eyeing the badly-dyed, yellowish-red hair with distaste, "wouldn't you like some supper?"

After all, it must be a damnable job for *any* woman, and he must make it as easy for her as he could——

Then with a queer little sound in her throat, Gloria Cavendish rose jerkily, and faced him.

For a second he stared stupidly at the ravaged, raddled

old face, and then he cried with sudden hoarseness—"Nellie! Nellie Miller!"

She nodded several times, a faint smirk on her smeared lips. "So," she said, "you do remember me, Mr. Charlie!"

What a Twelfth Night, indeed. She might herself, he thought in his confusion and amazement, almost be the old image of Befana, the old woman whom Roman children believe will switch them if they are naughty, and whose effigy, like a female Guy Fawkes, he and Gracie had, that night twenty-six years ago, seen borne by howling boys over the heads of the crowd, in the Piazza Navona.

"I—I am s—surprised to see you again, Nellie," he stammered. "It's a very long time——"

"Thirty-three years in July it'll be," was her matter-of-fact reply, as she again sat down and took up her work.

"Will it indeed?— You have a good memory. For God's sake," he broke out in sudden impossible irritation, "*don't knit!*"

The woman made no demur, and laid down the mass of scarlet wool. "Just as you like," she said tractably; "why don't you sit down Mr. Charlie?"

But he went to the table, and wrenching the cork out of the bottle, drank a glass of wine in one swallow. "Come," he then said, "and have something to eat—" And obediently she came to the table.

It was clear that she was hungry, and that she thoroughly enjoyed the cold chicken, and the too-sour salad. The wine she hardly touched.

Beville, on the contrary, ate nothing, having just finished dinner, but he drank a good deal of wine, and felt the better for it.

"Now I know," he observed presently, "why you didn't get up! You knew it was me."

She nodded. "Yes. They told me this morning. It *did* give me a turn to call myself Lady Beville! Me that remembers Her Ladyship— Her *old* Ladyship—so well. Do you ever go to the Hall now?"

"Not often. My—*er*—I prefer London, and Marsham-Upton was always a bit too damp for my daughter— But tell me about yourself, Nellie."

She did not seem to hear his last words, and was staring past him at the wall. "Your daughter," she repeated slowly, "I didn't know you had a daughter——"

"Indeed I have," he cried, with a joviality that sounded hollow to his own ears, "*and* a granddaughter!"

"I see." She had laid down her fork, and would eat no more. Nothing he could say induced her to eat anything more. Very queer she was, he thought—she had always been a little queer, even when she was so young and so very pretty, and now the prettiness had gone, but the queerness had augmented.

As he reflected, the station clock struck midnight, and with a shrug he excused himself, took his dressing-case into the bathroom, had a bath, and, arrayed in pyjamas and his brilliant brocaded dressing-gown, rejoined the woman by the fire.

"Hadn't you," he suggested with embarrassment, "better—*er*—p-prepare for the night?"

She nodded. "You leave it all to me, Mr. Charlie—I know the ropes, you see——"

Poor little Nellie Miller, to have grown into this tragic Gloria Cavendish, and so well to know those abominable ropes. . . .

As he sat by the fire he remembered it all; things he had forgotten years and years ago; the old cottage where she lived with her father, big Giles, who was a labourer on one of his father's farms; there had been honeysuckle clustering over the door, and hens and ducks clucked and quacked in the little garden. And she, Nellie, had worn a blue sunbonnet the first time he had seen her— 'Just like a story-book——'

She had left Marsham suddenly, he remembered, just after he had gone back to Cambridge, and so far as he knew, no one there had heard of her again, for Giles had

been killed by a kick from a horse, and Mrs. Miller, after his death, went to live with her own people in another county——

What an astonishing coincidence that it should be Nellie about whom Gracie was to get her divorce. Not one of all those others, but with Nellie Miller! Nellie Miller of whom Gracie had never even heard.

And what must the girl's life have been, to develop into such a sordid and tragic old age. For Gloria Cavendish was old, though she was a year or so younger than he—Her neck and face, he thought, were like the neck and face of an aged turtle——

Then the bathroom door opened and Gloria Cavendish came out in a grey flannel dressing-gown, and she was not old. Years seemed to have left her eyes and face.

"You'll excuse me for removing me make-up," she began, "but I have to give me skin a rest when I can, and I thought you wouldn't mind."

"I—I think you look very nice without it," he answered sincerely. "You look like your old self now, and what a pretty girl you were, Nellie——"

Her face, cleared of its mess of badly applied colours, was tired, middle-aged, and sad, but it was no longer grotesque or horrible. Her eyes too, looked clear and kind, and the lashes reminded him of Gracie's. Nice, mouse-coloured lashes, they were.

And she had brushed her parti-coloured hair flat with a wet brush, which gave her an odd likeness to a little girl after her bath.

Meeting his eyes she smiled vaguely. "Will you," she asked, "have a sleep first, or shall I? I don't mind a bit, you know; whichever you prefer——"

"Oh, you have a sleep. I'll sit by the fire and read," he returned. "I'm not tired, and I don't think I *could* sleep——"

"Right you are."

Very modestly she got into bed, and slipping off her

dressing-gown, laid it across her feet. "I've got a *lovely* one," she remarked gaily, "for the morning——"

"For the morning?"

"Of course! For when the chambermaid and the waiter come in. They," she added, "will be *her* witnesses. Didn't you know that?"

"No, I didn't know. Oh yes, of course I did— Well, go to sleep, Nellie——"

And almost at once she slept.

He sat there in the big chair by the fire, miserable and resentful, until well after three, when she suddenly woke and called his name.

"Mr. Charlie," she said, "aren't you cold?"

He started, for he had dropped off, and the fire was nearly out.

Hastily he replenished it, and then as she was about to get up, he made her stay where she was, and they talked.

"It's a pity," she commented, "that your wife is divorcing you. *Why* is she, Mr. Charlie? Did you treat her bad?"

He nodded. "Yes, I treated her very bad."

"Ladies?"

Again he nodded.

"I *am* sorry," she repeated, "for I'm a great believer in marriage."

"*Are* you, Nellie?"

"Yes. I was gay for years—I only gave up when I had the fever, and lost me looks—but it's no good, being gay isn't. Seems as if you can't have a home—not a *real* one—unless you're *married*."

"You never married, then? That seems strange," he went on, in answer to her shake of the head, "you were so *very* pretty, and—so nice, too. Do you still love flowers?"

She nodded but did not speak, and again he resumed: "I often wondered what had become of you, Nellie. When I came home for Christmas you had gone, and your poor father was dead, and your mother had gone away——"

"I went to Devonshire," she said slowly, after a pause. "I lived there for quite a long while, and then I was ill, and then—somehow— But," she added quickly, "you were the first, Charlie. You know that, don't you?"

"Of course I do, my dear—" He did not add what was the truth, that she too had been the first. His first. They were both silent for a while, and then she asked him for a sandwich, and sat up in bed munching with appetite, her clear eyes again vague.

"Are you going to be married again?" she asked as she munched, and he shrugged his shoulders. "I don't know. I probably shall, for I hate to be alone. I'm not one of those clever men, you know. I'm a *low-brow*. And as to marrying, well, there is a lady of whom I'm very fond," he went on, "and she's the nicest woman I've ever known—except——"

"Except your wife, you were going to say! Why, Mr. Charlie," Miss Cavendish cried, "I believe you're in love with your wife!"

"They say I don't know how to love anyone," he returned moodily.

"Pooh! I know a lot about men, and unless you are in love with that other lady, or someone else, then it *is* your wife. There's *some-one*——"

"How do you know, Nellie?" he asked with quick curiosity, and she replied simply: "By your eyes. You can always tell everything by the eyes," she went on, finishing her sandwich, "if you know how to look at them."

It sounded, as she said it, true, and he wondered.

"Listen, Nellie," he began, after a moment's reflection, "you and I are old friends, and I'm very lonely; I'd like to tell you all about it——"

She nodded. "Yes, do, Mr. Charlie, it'll do you good to get it off your chest——"

So he told her his story from the beginning, and because he still perceived in her the girl he had known when they were both nearly children, and because she was at the same

time an utter stranger to him, he told her more of the story than he had told any of his other confidantes; he told her everything. Time went on, the fire grew faint and was replenished, hunger came on him, and he sat gnawing drumsticks as he talked, and drinking the last of the champagne, and on and on went the unfolding of his tale.

Nellie Miller listened quietly; sometimes her mouth grew lax and her eyes empty for a moment, but quickly her attention returned to him, and he could see that she was thinking with all her poor powers.

"—so you see," he finished, "that there was nothing else for me to do."

"No. Nothing else. It's a pity," she added, "that she doesn't know you as well as I do."

"My wife not know me as well as you do, Nellie?"

"Yes. You see, Mr. Charlie, I knew you when you were really *you*. Nothing had happened then to make you seem different. When people have written all over a sheet of paper it looks different, doesn't it, but it isn't. It's just a sheet of white paper, under all the ink——"

She was very queer, he thought; but then she never had been absolutely normal. He'd been a fool to tell her! '*What* a thing to do, just because I knew her over thirty years ago; a woman like her; a woman with that life behind her——'

"Take," she was saying, "*me* for instance, Mr. Charlie. Think of all the wicked things I've done, and yet I'm *me*——Nellie—all the time——"

"Of course you are my dear," he returned kindly.

She nodded. "Of course I am. And you're just Mr. Charlie up at the Hall! Do you remember how you cried in the wood? I always remember your crying, and you'd like to cry now, wouldn't you?"

"No, I'd not! I'd hate it. What have I got to cry about?" But his eyes were full of tears, and he suddenly did wish that he might weep without restraint. He was very tired, he told himself, and Violet, though she loved

and had forgiven him, was away, very far away, with that Bob Quintana, and Vincent was dead, and Gracie didn't like him— Yes, he did want to cry, as men may cry at a deathbed, but he rose, and jerking up one of the blinds, gazed defiantly out across a forest of chimneys, behind which a faint pallor showed that though day was not yet being born, night was dying——

Presently he went and had a cold shower, and he was beginning to dress when Miss Cavendish knocked at the door. "You're not dressing," she called, "are you? Because you musn't. When I ring for tea you must be in your pyjamas, you know——"

"Oh, yes, of course——" Her matter-of-fact acceptance of the position had done away with his embarrassment, and presently, when she had touched up her face—a very little, by his request—and arrayed herself in her gaudy pink dressing-gown, in the bed, against a pile of pillows, she began talking again.

"You'll be happier," she said with conviction, "once it's all over, and *she* is happy. Some of my clients have been the best of friends with their wives, once they weren't their wives any longer! That's the *fashion* now——"

"Is it? But I shall be so lonely, Nellie! I'm *angry*, too, with my wife. I was never really angry before with her, but I am now, and it—it hurts."

"'And to be wroth with one we love'," quoted the amazing woman in the bed, with a smirk, "'doth work like madness in the brain.' That's Keats."

"Is it?" repeated Beville, who knew no better. "You read a lot, Nellie?"

"No, no, I hardly ever read. But a gentleman friend of mine—not a client—said it once to me about a lady friend of his, and it—stuck. My head gets a bit funny once in a while," she added confidentially, "but I've always remembered that, somehow——"

Suddenly Beville turned full towards her. "Nellie," he declared, in a resolute voice, "you are right. I've been so

angry I wouldn't admit it, and—I've been trying to fool myself, but—I may not be capable of a really fine love, but what love I've got isn't for—that lady I told you about, at all, and I'll never marry her. I—I think I'd *die* if I had to see her—or anyone else—sitting in my wife's old chair. I couldn't *bear* it. Yes," he added, solemnly and slowly, "you were right; I do love Gracie."

It was a great relief to him to make this unreserved acknowledgment, and it no longer struck him as strange that he should so confide in this poor, dim-witted creature. They had cried together one day centuries ago, in a wood; they were friends.

She nodded, clapping her thin hands softly together. "Of course, Mr. Charlie," she cried, "of course I knew you loved her—I saw it in your eyes! *Good* Mr. Charlie. You were always so good——"

Then, with a sudden reversion to the business side of their interview, she reached out and rang the bell. "It's nearly seven," she explained, "and I'm gasping for a cup of tea. Come and sit on the bed, and let me do the talking——"

The waiter knew perfectly well that the old girl wasn't Lady Beville any more than, a month before, she had been Mrs. Ronald McTavish, but what cared he?

He brought their tea, and an hour later their breakfast, and when he went home that night he told his wife that the people in 289 were a rum couple. "Talkin' away like two old friends, they were, and when she called him darling that was for *my* benefit——" When the waiter had finally left the room Beville put into words a thought that had been clamouring in his mind for some hours.

"Nellie," he said, "this isn't good enough for you, this job——"

"Oh, it's all right," she replied indifferently, "I get good money, and all my gentlemen treat me most respectful——"

"How long have you been doing it, by the way?"

"I don't remember— Ever since me looks went, as I told you— There was a long time—seventeen years all but two months," she added, "when I lived in the country in Devonshire, in a cottage. I took in washing, and provided teas and minerals for motor-car people. That was a good time! But in 1917 I came to London, I won't tell you about *that*— But I got the fever, and me looks went——"

"Why, Nellie?" he asked gently. "Surely you liked the country best—*why* did you come to London?"

She frowned. "Somebody," she replied, "went away then——"

"I see. Well, I want you to do me a great favour, my dear. Will you?"

She nodded vehemently. "I'll do anything for you, Mr. Charlie!"

"That is good of you. I am a very rich man, of course, and I hate my friends to—to work in ways I don't like. I want you to let me make you a little allowance, Nellie. Not a big one, you know, just a little one—say three hundred a year. And I want you to live without—without working. For old times' sake."

But to his grieved surprise his suggestion was met with an almost insane opposition. "No, no," she cried wildly, wringing her hands, "I can't have money from you. Oh, *no*! And I don't *want* to stop working! It isn't like—the way I used to be. My gentlemen all respect me very highly. I only take *real* gentlemen. The solicitors know I only take real gentlemen——"

"But how nice it would be," he persisted, "for you to have two pretty rooms, say—here in London if you like. You could have flowers growing in pots, and—a canary, and a cat——"

"Then the cat would eat the canary."

"No, it wouldn't! Or you could have a little dog, Nellie—" he took her hand, and spoke very kindly. "Please let me do this small thing for you. I have always wondered about you, and been sorry——"

"Sorry?" Her abrupt laugh was nearly a hoot, and she jerked away her hand, and rose. "You needn't be sorry for me, Mr. Charlie! I'm as happy as a bird, I am. But it's getting late, and I must go and dress"—and she had slammed the bathroom door behind her.

Beville sat by the fire and smoked until she returned, made-up and dressed for the street, and when he saw her hat he understood her better.

Everyone has seen in the London streets certain old women of an odd, vague, yet important bearing, who wear very peculiar hats. These hats are usually high in the crown, and they are invariably of a forgotten, nowadays grotesque fashion. Flowers adorn them, with bows of faded, limp ribbon and sad feathers, and sometimes a scrap of dirty lace is added to the pitiable confusion.

And without exception the faces under these hats are, in a certain gay vagueness, a hard to explain, happy blankness, alike. The women who thus adorn themselves are not mad, but they are a degree or two below the normal mentality; as Italians say, there is in their week no Friday.

And Charles Beville now knew that the girl he had known so long ago had become one of those women. It made him very sad, for he felt much to blame for her condition, but there was nothing that he could do, so presently he rang for the bill, paid and pocketed it, and then he and the woman who was to free his wife of him, went downstairs and got into a taxi. The pocketing of that bill had seemed to ring a knell in his heart, and an almost unbearable sadness had descended like a cloud on him. She, too, had relapsed into moody thoughtfulness, so for some time neither of them had spoken, when she suddenly turned to him, and he saw that she was crying.

"Mr. Charlie," she said, "you were very kind to want to give me money, but I can't take it. You mustn't mind, will you? I shouldn't like you to think that I'm ungrateful——"

"No, no, Nellie. You must do just as you like, my poor girl——"

She caught his hand and held it tight.

"There's one thing you *could* do," she went on. "One thing I've always wanted— Will you do it for me, Mr. Charlie? Oh," she besought, "*will* you?"

"Of course I will, Nellie. What is it?"

Brushing away her tears, she laughed softly and shyly. "Which way," she asked, "are we going? Where are you going to set me down?"

"You must let me drive you home, of course, my dear——"

"But it's surely out of your way——"

"I live in St. James's Place, but that doesn't matter. Where do *you* live?"

Again she gave that soft, shy laugh. "Listen," she said, "I will take *you* somewhere! You will come, for you promised! But you mustn't peep. Will you shut your eyes tight, and not peep?"

"I—yes, I suppose so, but——"

Knocking on the glass, she stopped the taxi, and putting her head out into the foggy air, gave a short direction to the chauffeur.

Then she again took Beville's hand and held it tightly in her own.

"Shut your eyes," she said, "shut them *tight*, and mind you don't peep. It's very early, and there won't be anyone there yet, so when we get out, I can lead you. You won't open them then, either, will you? Oh, it is so *lovely* to take you there at last!"

She was so twittering with excitement and delight, and he was so sorry for her, and so anxious to do anything to make her a little happier, that without much reluctance he agreed to her absurd request, and closed his eyes.

She did not speak for some minutes, and then she said in a low voice: "It's so *wonderful*, Mr. Charlie, so lovely! You *are* going to be glad!"

'Poor soul,' he thought, 'what an incredible business it all is——'

And as the taxi went on he turned his mind again to Gracie.

'I'll just do whatever she wants me to,' he reflected. 'She's unfair and unkind to me, but that's because she doesn't love me, and as I *do* love *her*—I wish dear old Vincent knew!—I will be very kind to her. . . . Violet will be glad I am, too. . . . No, I couldn't ever marry poor Edith, fond though I am of her——'

The taxi had stopped in a noisy street, and Miss Cavendish reminded him not to open his eyes. "I'll help you out," she added excitedly. "There you are! Now come with me. If anyone sees your eyes are shut, they will just think you're blind! Oh, Mr. Charlie, you *won't* peep, will you?"

"No, no, Nellie, I promise you I won't—my eyes are tight shut."

They walked for a moment, and then went up a shallow step or two, and she led him on a few paces.

"Now," she said, and he knew that she was laughing and crying at once, "open your eyes, Charlie! It's Charlie's grave. The Germans killed him when he was only seventeen, but they laid him among the Kings——"

They stood in Westminster Abbey at the grave of the unknown soldier.

Beville could never quite remember what happened after he opened his eyes. That Nellie Miller firmly believed her son to be lying there under the marble slab, he knew; and he knew that the belief made of her a proud, and even nearly a happy, woman. And without her telling him, he of course had at once understood that her son, the seventeen-year-old boy who had died for his country, was his son as well.

He remembered asking her why she had never let him

know about the boy, but he could barely recall her confused, shy answer. Something, it was, about the boy's being all *hers*.

And he was glad to know that the lamentable period of her life had not begun until the boy had been killed, and that "the fever" had, by destroying her looks, soon cut it short. But the rest of their short, whispered dialogue always remained nebular and sketchy to him.

Finally, he knew, she had knelt and said a prayer, with many odd bobs and genuflections, at which the guardian of the place looked on with kindly tolerance, and then—like a will-o'-the-wisp she had flitted away into the shadows, and he was alone.

Angry with himself for having failed to overtake her, still bewildered and ashamed for never having borne his share of the poor creature's responsibility—"taken in washing, poor soul, and providing motorists with tea and minerals"—bitterly regretting his folly in not having insisted on being told her address, he paid off his taxi and started for a walk, the only thing, he knew, that could in any way comfort him.

The sun was coming out, and exercise would clear his brain, and later on he would send Messrs. Rivers and Underwood the hotel bill.

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When he reached Hampstead Heath the sun had strengthened, gilding the wet boughs of the trees, and the bracken, and deluding a stray bird into brief song. Caen Wood is, even in the late autumn, a place of peace and beauty, and its solitude soothed the unhappy and bewildered man. Everyone must dree his own weird by himself, as well as for himself, and now, after many years of easily poured out confidences, of never questioning the rightness of his eternal need of consolation, he had found what greater souls have always known, that solitude is the first essential to self-knowledge.

He had, indeed, always instinctively gone for long, solitary walks when he was trying to think, but the solitude had been merely a disregarded attribute of the exercise, whereas he was now learning the immense healing and simplifying value of alone-ness itself.

'So,' he thought, staring blindly at the splendid view stretched before him, 'that's what it is. I love Gracie. I always have, too. Then what in Hell made me behave as I've done? And just when I've found out that I *can* get along all right without all those fool women, and that I can't get along without her, she's going to divorce me!'

He was puzzled by the co-existence of this so complicating love with his deep anger with his wife—for he was very angry indeed with her.

To his simple creed a man couldn't be angry—not for long—with the woman he loved, yet here he was indignant with her as he had never before been indignant, and yet miserable beyond words in the knowledge that he was losing her.

Sitting down on an outcrop of rock, he stayed for a long time staring before him and seeing nothing. 'She's no business to do it,' he thought; 'it isn't fair. I haven't done one single thing since Violet was ill——'

Then the fundamental sweetness of his nature surged up, and he acknowledged to himself the truth of what Vincent had said: that Gracie had taken him back only because of Violet's danger. And presently, with a deep sigh he rose, stretching himself like a man just waking from a heavy sleep. "The truth is," he muttered, "that she bit off more than she could chew. While she was so frightened about Violet, she thought she *could* forgive me, and then when she got back from the yacht, and there I was, she—just couldn't——"

Only—and to this his mind came back over and over again, she had been unfair to him all those years, in not letting him know she knew, and that he was making her unhappy. 'How was *I* to know she was unhappy, when

she never said a word,' he thought wrathfully. 'She always *looks* sad, anyhow, with that long nose like a sheep. Her *darling* nose——'

It was—and it always will be—quite beyond his powers of understanding how she could have gone on for twenty years knowing, and suffering, and not telling him. He himself was proud, and at times even haughty, but Lady Grace's kind of pride was above his comprehension——

He went on to Highgate, and thence to the open country, had some bread and cheese and ale in a village inn, and at tea-time found himself at the top of a hill on the slopes of which a man was driving a plough drawn by a big, white horse.

'Now that chap's wife's not going to divorce *him*,' he thought. 'I'll bet she's waiting at home to give him his supper—Gracie should have *told* me, by God she should!'

But that was the last flare-up of his rancour.

He'd go home and have a bath, and some dinner, and then he'd send her the hotel-bill with a very decent letter. He knew that he ought to send the bill to her solicitors, but that he would not do. He would send it to her. His letter, though, would be very nice. He would take great pains with it. "'She's been unhappy long enough,'" he said aloud, watching the white horse clumsily turning, and starting a fresh furrow, and that was his ultimate declaration of remorse; his apology.

At a near-by station he took a train back to town, and from the station he went home, muddy and tired, but resigned, and determined to make up to Gracie—although she should have told him—as much as he could, for the pain he had caused her.

He opened the door with his latchkey, and went in. How warm the house was and how good it smelt, somehow! Poor old Domenico had got in some carnations! What a lovely and lovable house it was, and now it would always be—empty. No matter how long he might live,

the house would henceforth be empty. He shuddered, and then, suddenly very tired, went in to the library. He'd rest a bit before going upstairs.

And when he opened the door, there sat Gracie in her chair.

She had on her hat, and she was not knitting, but there she was by the low fire, in her own chair.

His first reaction to her presence was not one of pleasure. Why had she come here to make things worse?

"Hello," he said gruffly. "I—I didn't expect to find you here——"

"I know, Charles. I didn't expect to come, either, but——"

Fumbling in his pocket he produced the hotel bill, and tossed it into her lap. "Here's your evidence," he said, and then he turned sharply away, for his lips were shaking.

There was a moment's silence, and then he heard a quick sound, and instinctively turned again. She had thrown the folded paper into the fire.

"Good God," he shouted, "what are you doing?" And kneeling quickly, he snatched it from the dying flames.

"There now," he went on, stamping the flames out on the rug, "you've made me burn my thumb! Look at that will you? It's going to be a blister— A fool thing to do, I call it, to burn that bill, after all the trouble I took to get it——"

"Oh, Charles—I *am* sorry!" But as she went to the cupboard where she kept her first-aid box he heard a little laugh.

"It's going to be very bad," he repeated, furious, shaking his hand violently; "it hurts like Hell. What in God's name made you *do* such a thing!"

"Hold it lower—I *am* so sorry. There, the oil will make it better——"

Defly she bandaged the small burn, her soft, greying hair touching his chest, and when it was finished she looked gravely up into his pain- and bewilderment-contracted face.

"I don't," she said, "*want* any evidence, Charles. I'm not going to divorce you."

He stared. "What the deuce d'you mean?"

"Just that. I've rung up Mr. Rivers and told him, and I've told Uncle Cyprian—who thinks me a fool—and I'm not going to divorce you. Why," she added quietly, "don't you sit down?"

He sat down in his own chair which, during the vacancy of *her* own one, had become so oddly less his very own.

"Why aren't you, Gracie?" he asked.

She drew a deep breath. "Because," she said slowly, "I've had a visit to-day. A visit from—a lady——"

"A lady? Not one of——" he broke off abashed, but she nodded, a quick smile quivering for a second on her lips. "Yes, my dear. Nellie Miller it was."

Sometimes in great amazement jaws do literally drop, and Charles Beville's dropped now.

"Nellie Miller? But how did she find you?"

"She knew we lived in St. James's Place, so she came here, and asked one of the chauffeurs. Then—Domenico gave her Uncle Cyprian's address. Very simple——"

He nodded, no longer nursing his thumb. "But I don't see——"

Grace Beville was pale, and she looked very tired, but her pale blue eyes gazed at him steadily and with a real and uncondescending kindness, that he had not seen in them for years.

"She told me," she began slowly, "a lot of things, Charles. About you—'Mr. Charlie'. And when you were a boy——"

"I suppose," he broke in conscientiously, "you realize that the poor thing's *mind* is a bit queer? Always was——"

"I know. But sometimes these people have a kind of insight—the Russians understand them better than we do——"

"Oh, the *Russians*," murmured Beville, who had had a brief and losing struggle with Dostoievsky.

"Yes, yes, I know, but never mind that now. Well, Nellie Miller told me many things I never knew before about you— Please don't interrupt me! And she told me some things you said to her last night, or this morning. I—I seem to have been very stupid, Charles——"

"Nonsense, you were never a bit stupid!"

"I hope it *was* that," she went on simply, "for if it wasn't, it was something very much worse. I needn't—I couldn't—tell you all she said; she stayed a long time, and talked a great deal—but I have come here to tell you what she made me see. Oh, Charles——" She gave a little half-sob, but went on quickly, "I have been very wrong. I thought I was being brave, but I wasn't. I was terribly hurt—and I had every right to be hurt and miserable, too, for you were dreadful—but as for me, I just wallowed in my injured *vanity*, and didn't help you a bit."

"I have been an awful swine, Gracie," he declared humbly, hanging his head.

"Yes, but I've been wrong, too——"

She went on, speaking very slowly, in a low hesitant voice, and he realized that he must not interrupt her; that would be unfair and unkind of him to interrupt her, because she was making reparation.

"I never knew before that I was vain," she said; "I always thought it was pride—though I should have known better—for vanity and pride aren't really a bit alike—but it was vanity. Poor Papa spoiled me, of course, after dear Mamma died, and his being Ambassador and so on—it all made me feel that I was very important. Then there was my playing; I did play well, of course, but no better than lots of other people—and I—I do really love good pictures and books——"

"I don't," he broke in irrepressibly——

But with a gesture she bade him be silent and went on resolute though soft-voiced. "And when I fell in love with

you, Charles, I expected you to like the things I did, and when you didn't I was angry, I—I felt superior, which is a most *dreadful* thing. And then people liked you so much more than they did me, and I hadn't the sense to know it was really because you were nicer than I!"

"Oh, God!" murmured Beville sincerely shocked.

"Yes, nicer; because you are a warm person and I am a cold one," she went on with some difficulty. "You're much kinder than I am, for instance; warmer-hearted."

"Oh, I'm warm-hearted all right," he assented, "but I'm so damned *silly*!"

She smiled, and the smile made her young to him. "And then—Alice—it hurt me so I thought I should die. I used to lie on the floor in my room and cry! I *hated* Alice Anthony. She had," she added, "such a beautiful nose, and even dear Papa always said mine was like a sheep's, and—well, Charles, you know what you did, so I needn't talk about that. My business is what I did. I ought to have let you know that I knew, and that I—couldn't bear it because I loved you so."

"Gracie——"

"Yes, I did. Let me finish, please. Rachel Baring was in love with you— Oh, I know you didn't know it, but I did; so being bitter by nature she tried to hurt you. How she found out about that Spanish dancing woman I have no idea—probably Tony told her when he had been drinking—but anyhow she knew, and she came and told me. She told me about some others, too—other women I mean——"

"They weren't women," he murmured, half-unconsciously, "they were mice——"

Lady Grace stared at him, her pale eyebrows like little crescent moons. "'Mice?'" she repeated in a bewildered voice.

"Yes, Mice. But never mind that now, I'll explain that to you afterwards."

"Well, you see I was terribly unhappy, Charles.

I wasn't even beautiful, and nothing on earth gives a woman self-confidence as beauty does. Alice had her wonderful nose and her hair, the Spaniard had that splendid figure and those glorious eyes—I could go on for hours. Whereas I was plain, or plainish, and every time I looked in my glass I saw my ugly light lashes and my sheep nose——”

“Your nose,” he put in firmly, “is beautiful, Gracie——”

“And my sheep nose; and I was soaked with jealousy and misery, it was dreadful. Then—I tried to fall back on my mind, my second-rate, insignificant mind. I said to myself how clever I was, and that you liked only stupid, unintellectual women because you were unintellectual yourself. I measured everything by taste in artistic things—as if,” she added with uncharacteristic vehemence, “that mattered.”

“Matters a lot, if you ask me.”

“No it doesn't, Charles. But I was so vain that I'd have died rather than let you know how much I suffered, and how much I—cared. So I made up my mind not to care——”

He rose quickly and came towards her, his hands outstretched. “My darling girl,” he returned, “you're splendidly generous—you're magnificent. But you're all wrong. Utterly, terribly wrong! It hasn't been your fault at all. You were always as good as an angel—and was a—I was a god-forsaken swine. A damn fool. A *beast*. It's exactly what Fifi said. Puss in boots—mice——”

“Wait a minute.” Rising, she came towards him, her face worn and undone. “I should,” she went on hurriedly, “have told you at once that I knew. The minute Rachel told me I should have come straight to you—and—given you *hell* as you say. If I'd given you hell, I'd have given you a chance.”

“Well, God knows that's true,” he said simply. “But

never mind now. Oh, Gracie, if you knew how sorry I am——”

“Wait a minute. You have already begged my pardon, Charles; once at poor Vincent’s and once at Saucers. You begged my pardon then and—and promised to be good——”

“Well, Gracie,” he broke in irrepressibly. “I *was* good! Damn it, I was as good as gold.”

She nodded; her eyes very gentle. “I know you were, and I was dreadful to you. So now it’s my turn to beg your pardon, and—to promise to be good. And I do.” Her voice broke, and to his horror and ecstasy, he saw that her eyes were full of tears. “There is just one more thing that I’d better tell you, because I’ve been such a fool you probably don’t know it. I was going to marry poor Vincent but I never loved him. In all my life, Carluccio, I’ve never loved anyone but you.”

She had not called him Carluccio—Big Charles—for over twenty years. She had begged his pardon; he, who had been so bad, to be asked to forgive her who had always been an angel, and she had never loved anyone but him!

He burst into tears and took her into his arms.

.

Sad, wise, old Domenico, shuffling in to see to the fire and draw the curtains—it was a Thursday and John’s day out—opened the door a moment later, but they didn’t hear him, and he closed it silently.

THE END



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